

Weather or Not ~ The Farming Goes On

Spring of 2010 may go down as one of the wettest and possibly coldest, in recent history. Hard rain on May 27th is certainly uncommon in Sonoma County. Some say, unprecedented. It may be setting the stage for a new weather pattern. Time will tell. What we do know is that it has affected the farming at Oak Hill Farm and probably most of the gardens in the valley.

Seeds need particular conditions to germinate, grow and thrive into productive plants. After winter solstice, when daylight hours begin to increase, Paul feels comfortable planting salad crops, carrots and greens into prepared beds. The earliest fields are actually partially prepped in the fall, being "bedded up" to allow for quick drainage. At the first break in the weather in January, those beds are seeded. This year we did get a dry spell that allowed for planting seed and transplants at the end of January in our flattest field on the farm. Flat is critical because heavy rains are still expected, and erosion is a real possibility. Since then however it has been a start-and-stop spring with significant rains lasting 6-8 weeks longer than usual. We've done our best to plant between storms.

Near the end of March we plant the earliest tomatoes using plastic "mulch". This plastic covering warms the soil by 10 degrees or more, and holds that warmth into the night making frost damage far less likely. We do the same for melons hoping to have our earliest melons (75-80 days for "Sugar Baby" watermelon" by late June or early July. This year that won't be happening. Cold and perpetual rains have all but killed even our transplanted melons. We don't get involved much in protective spraying. In this

case the environmental conditions were just too overwhelming to imagine saving the crop.

The weekly rains have also messed with the planting schedules. To have a consistent supply of salad, peas, etc., many things need to be planted every other week. Rain has caused many plantings to be delayed or missed altogether. The result will be breaks in supply. We had to hold one planting of broccoli and cauliflower nearly a month past it's optimal time. This results in dramatically lower yields because often plants can't grow out of their stunted, early container life.

The good news is that our crop diversity is large enough to hedge some of the losses with longer than expected harvests in crops that appreciate all the rain like salad, radishes, fennel and spinach --- which we've had very good luck with this spring. The other bonus is low electrical bills due to very minimal irrigating needs. 🐦

This is what the melons looked like during the last rain-storm. Now, they are pretty much dead!





What Are the Bees Doing?

Most of the Oak Hill Farm hives came out of winter in excellent condition. The bee colonies are now benefiting from this year's generous nectar and pollen flows and the flight activity in the apiary is a pleasure to watch.


During the past couple months, the bee populations have been increasing at a remarkable pace and the brood nests have become large, filled with well fed developing bees that are bathing in pools of royal jelly. This may sound like decadent luxury, but it is in fact a sign of excellent health and superb nutrition for bees.

At the heart of these large nests are prolific queens. During these periods of rapid development of the nests, individual queens typically lay their weight in eggs every single day, 1,500 eggs per day, sometimes as many as three thousand. Queens could not generate so many eggs without the constant care and feeding they receive from their attendant bees.

Well over forty young queen bees were born in the apiary in April. The weather and the abundance of male bees, the drones, were nearly perfect in early May for their mating flights. Some of these queens will head next

spring's Oak Hill Farm colonies.

Queen bees do not mate inside their hives. In fact, they must fly away from their nests to specific areas where the drones assemble. This is one of the mechanisms that nature has devised to prevent or reduce inbreeding and its damaging effects. The young queens perform a few mating flights over a few days, flying as far as three miles to mate in flight with ten to as many as forty drones, and occasionally more. During these flights, they accumulate enough semen to last them for the rest of their lives. A few days after returning to their nests from the last of these flights, they begin laying eggs.

The forager bees fly to the profuse bloom any time the weather permits. There they join all sorts of bumble bees and other native pollinators. This intense pollination work bodes well for splendid and tasty fruit and berries and for nice crops. An enjoyable product of this bee frenzy should be some delicious Oak Hill Farm honey, although it is still premature to say when it will be ripe. However, the honey combs are filling up beautifully with the golden nectar, and we can at least dream and anticipate. 

VEGETABLE OF THE MONTH


Summer Squash

Cucubita pepo

Once I see zucchini, I know summer is right around the corner. Oak Hill Farm planted it's first summer squash in April with frost protection (covers). And will plant its last in August. We should have a continuous supply from June through November.

This year we are growing just two varieties, a green called Raven and a yellow straightneck called Sunray. From seed in the ground to the first harvest date is about 50 days of warm weather.

Nutritionally, it's one of the least allergenic foods out there. Low in calories and high in nutrients, it's an excellent summertime food, pairing well with almost everything. Partners include: olive oil, butter, yogurt, parmesan, gruyere, and goat cheeses. As for herbs, try garlic, parsley, basil, marjoram, thyme, dill, mint and/or lemon. Walnuts and pine nuts are great with summer squash too. Cooking briefly preserves its texture but don't be afraid of longer cooking which brings out much more flavor.

Zucchini is the most prolific of all the cucurbits (winter and summer squash). Some plants can yeild as many as 50 fruits! No wonder new and interesting ways to prepare zucchini are always appreciated. 



Zucchini grows in the field.

We've all looked for summer squash inspiration, something new to do with zucchini. Please try these two recipes from Red Barn customer and Oak Hill Farm fan, Tricia O'Brien. Tricia has been a caterer in the Bay Area for over 20 years. She lives in Glen Ellen with her husband and two cats. You can email her directly at tobcater@aol.com or view complete recipes at www.cafetrix.blogspot.com.

Bruschetta for Summer Squash

For this recipe I used olive bread, but it's just as tasty with a country French or Levain. This is just a base to experiment with your own favorite herbs, or toppings. *Inspired by Deborah Madison's recipe in Local Flavor*

1 light green summer squash, thinly sliced and grilled
8 oz. Ricotta Cheese 3 T. Parmesan cheese
10 sprigs chopped parsley 2 T. Olive oil
Salt and pepper 4-6 slices of rustic bread

Using the grill or a grill pan, heat to a hot temperature. Toss the squash with a little olive oil, salt and pepper. Add the squash to the hot grill pan and cook about three minutes on each side. When squash has brightened in color and is a little translucent with grill marks set aside on a plate. It will continue to cook another couple minutes.

Using a small bowl, mix the ricotta, parmesan cheese, salt and pepper, the chopped parsley and the olive oil. Reserve some of the parsley for topping. Slice the fresh or day old bread and toast or grill it.

When the bread is toasted, add the ricotta spread, layer one or two pieces of the grilled zucchini on top and sprinkle a few parsley leaves for garnish. Bon Appetite!

Zuni Zucchini Pickles

Recipe by Judy Rogers of Zuni Café

Don't be fooled by pickling. This recipe is done in a very small batch and yields about 2 pints. These yummy pickles are so good they won't last.

1 lb. zucchini or patty pan squash 1 small purple onion
2 T. kosher salt

For the brine:

2 cups cider vinegar 1 cup sugar
1-1/2 t. dry mustard 1-1/2 t. crushed mustard seeds
1 teaspoon ground turmeric

Wash and trim the squash, then slice 1/16 inch thick on a mandoline or vegetable peeler. Slice the onion very thin as well. Place together in a large shallow bowl, add the salt and toss to distribute. Add a few ice cubes and cold water to cover, then stir to dissolve the salt.

After about an hour, taste and feel a piece of squash~it should be faintly salty and softened. Drain, making sure to remove any remaining ice cubes. Dry very thoroughly between towels.

Combine the vinegar, sugar, dry mustard, mustard seeds and turmeric in a saucepan and simmer for 3 minutes. Set aside, until just warm to the touch. If the brine is too hot, it will cook the vegetables and make the pickles soft. Replace the squash in the bowl and add the cooled brine. Stir to distribute the spices. Transfer to pickle jars, preferably ones with shoulders to hold the squash and onions beneath the surface of the brine. Cover and refrigerate for at least a day before serving to allow the flavors to mellow and permeate the squash, turning them a brilliant chartreuse color. These keep indefinitely in the fridge.



Barn Buzz

What we like about the re-opening of the Red Barn for the season: Beautiful spring flowers, delicious spring vegetables, customers' smiling faces and enthusiasm for the current and future bounty. We also like to hear about our customers' winter activities and to meet the new babies, along with books read, movies watched, music enjoyed and travels.

Speaking of travels, so far we've heard of visits to Peru, Ethiopia, Australia, Tuscany and Bhutan. In Bhutan, the culture still prevails and the king promotes a policy of "Gross National Happiness", instead of "product". Judging by the smiles, we're glad to see Oak Hill Farm's products bring happiness.

See you soon.

Gael and the Red Barn crew

Art Show



Winter Squash in June?

Those lumpy long-keepers are the subject of a series of paintings by Candi Edmondson. The current show explores the shapes and colors of fall with oil paint on wood panels. "This is by far, my most cohesive show. I loved doing the paintings and certainly grew as a painter," said Edmondson.

In addition to the squash, there are landscapes and animals. This is Candi's fourth show in the Red Barn.

You can find Oak Hill Farm produce on the menu at the following local restaurants:
 Cafe LaHaye ♦ Depot Hotel ♦ El Dorado Kitchen ♦ Epicurean Connection ♦ Estate in Sonoma ♦ fig cafe ♦ girl and the fig ♦ Grindstone Bakery ♦ Harvest Moon Cafe ♦ Kenwood Restaurant ♦ La Salette ♦ The Lodge at Sonoma ♦ Saffron ♦ Westerbeke Ranch ♦ Wild Thyme Catering

Available in June

SALAD GREENS Salad Mix, Arugula, Frisse, Head Lettuce, Spinach

HERBS Basil, Chives, Lovage, Oregano, Parsley, Rosemary, Sage, Sorrel, Spearmint, Tarragon & Thyme

VEGETABLES Beets, Broccoli, Cabbage (Napa & Savoy), Carrots, Cauliflower, Celery, Chard, Fennel, Kale, Leeks, Onions, Peas, Radish, Cherry Tomatoes and Zucchini

FLOWERS Agrostemma, Bells of Ireland, Bupleurum, Calendula, Campanula, Coreopsis, Cornflowers, Cosmos, Godetia, Larkspur, Nigella, Queen Anne's Lace, Stock, Sunflowers, Yarrow and Zinnias

Starting in July

VEGETABLES Beans, Corn, Cucumbers, Eggplant, Melons, Peppers, and lots of Tomatoes!

FLOWERS Amaranth, Calliopsis, Lavender, Millet, and more Sunflowers!

Farmers' Market BruHaha

Those of you that live locally may be reading in the Sonoma Index Tribune about the controversy at our Sonoma Valley Farmers' Markets. Issues center around management and vendor inclusion. It actually is not just a local issue. Please take time to read this thoughtful article in *Grist* if you have access. Find it at:

<http://www.grist.org/article/keeping-the-farmer-in-farmers-markets/>

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