



Supporting Sustainable Agriculture
in the Southern Appalachians through
Educational Programs and Outreach



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August 2009 Growers Notebook: News, Tips & Advice on Things Organic

Aug 31 2009

True Nature Country Fair



The True Nature Country Fair is September 26 & 27 at the Big Ivy Community Center in Barnardsville, NC. Come out for a weekend of fun, family, community,

local and organic products, love music, and much more. Interested in volunteering? Are you a musician looking to win our 1st annual fiddle contest? Want to join area faarmers, chefs, and food activists for our local foods benefit dinner? Visit organicgrowersschool.org for more information about these and other aspects of the Fair. Or contact Fair Program Manager Karen Vizzina at 828.342.1849 or [via email](#).

Organic Growers School 2010 Spring Conference

Well, you've been asking... and we have answers. Mark your calendars for the Southeast's largest organic agriculture conference! The 2010 Organic Growers School Spring Conference will be held March 6 and 7, 2009. Join farmers, gardeners, chefs, and other food enthusiasts for over 75 classes and hands on workshops on all aspects of sustainable

>>Meet CRAFT: Full Sun Farm



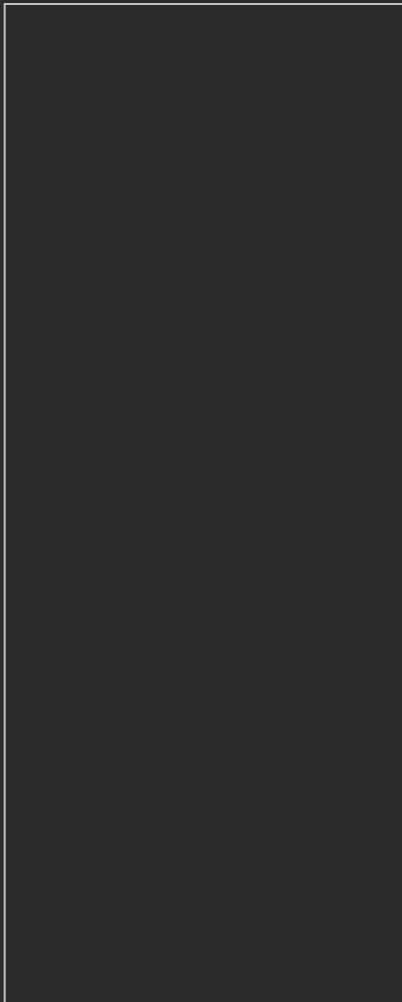
The CRAFT group had an awesome tour at Full Sun Farm in Sandy Mush this month.

Owners/Operators Vanessa Campbell and Alex Brown took our 30+ farmers and interns for a guided tour of their 17 acres, including vegetable fields, hoophouses, and barn, focusing their talk on strategies for management of insects, diseases, and weeds. Alex and Vanessa both emphasized the importance of knowing your pests and their life cycles and managing planting schedules and rotations accordingly. The pair explained how after farming their land sustainably for 13 years, they see that encouraging beneficial natural processes which prevent pest problems are paramount, instead of working to use organic methods which will address problems after they have occurred. For example, the new addition of biochar to Full Sun Farm's potting mix this year has made for healthier, stronger transplants. Alex and Vanessa hope that this practice will also allow beneficial microbes to flourish in their soils. This year the farm has been faced with onion maggots and phytopthera, although little pest pressure was apparent from our tour of the nearly immaculate acreage.

Alex and Vanessa attribute much of their weed efficiency to their use of re-usable landscape fabric and their mechanical cultivation system, using an Allis Chalmers G cultivating tractor to weed the crops. The Full Sun Farm Barn was an excellent lesson on mechanical cultivation, as the group saw and studied a budding basket weeder, a spring tine cultivator, a flame weeder, and other weed machines. Alex noted that mechanical cultivation always left something to learn, and that they are still "figuring out the best system... To be successful with mechanical cultivation, you have to plant mechanically, and set up beds to fit the machinery." Planting at Full Sun Farm is done

living. We've got surprises in store for 2010, so be sure to join us. Registration will open and the class schedule will be revealed in January so stay tuned. We're excited about this landmark year, and we hope to see you in March!

For more info about this event, [visit our website.](#)



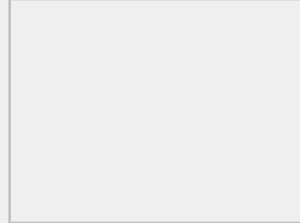
This Month's Pick

[Contact us to submit your favorite websites and recipes.](#)

Melon Salsa
There's nothing I love

either with seeders, or a Rainflo waterwheel transplanter.

Full Sun Farm employs three farm interns throughout the season, and everyone works full days to keep the farm running. You can catch them Wednesdays at the French Broad Food Co-



op Tailgate Market, and Saturdays at the North Asheville Tailgate Market at UNCA. They also run a 40 member CSA.

>> A Farmer's Questions About Local Food

Earlier this month, a conversation on the ASAP listserv ignited about this season's tailgate market sales. One farmer who has been on the scene for quite some time admitted that "sales are down 30%", sparking questions from market managers, customers, and other stakeholders as to whether this same downturn has been experienced by other growers. In talking with vendors from several Asheville-area tailgate markets, it appears as though many growers are looking at their records more closely this season. Two small scale growers told me that "sales have increased" and others said that sales "are up or down, depending on the week. It's really been unpredictable." In the wake of these discussions, another post on the list serv revealed the upturn in sales at one market in Alabama. What are the national trends for local food sales this summer compared to last? My investigations here in WNC, which are mere scratches on the surface and by no means indicate overall sales trends for our region, indicate that growers are feeling a difference. What are the reasons for any unpredictability, and what's the next step?

One reason for any downturn that was cited on the list serv was more competition within the local food market. A veteran farmer observed that there are more produce vendors competing for the same customers. Others have blamed a wet, warm summer for low and late yields. In addition, many people are growing their own food in home gardens, and have less need for food from local farms. On top of all this, our country is in recession, and Americans in general are much more conscious about where they spend their dollars, and what they get for what they pay. In 2007, the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project released a groundbreaking study on the potential for local food in Western North Carolina, citing that less than 1% of food consumed in WNC

more than a ripe, sweet local cantaloupe or watermelon in late summer. But sometimes, eating that whole melon myself is a tall order. This recipe is a great way to use melon for a sweet *and* salty snack that really hits the spot.

1 medium melon, or ½ of one large melon. Peeled, seeded, and diced (cantaloupe is best for this recipe, but watermelon is tasty, too!)
½ medium red onion, diced
1 green bell pepper, seeded and diced
1 jalapeno, seeded and pepper minced
1 T. fresh cilantro or basil, finely chopped
¼ t. ground cumin
1 t. salt
1 t. fresh ground pepper
3 T. lime juice
2 T. orange juice
1 T. rice vinegar

Bring a small pot of water to boil. Blanch the red onion for 30 seconds. Drain and splash with the rice vinegar. Put all of the ingredients in a medium bowl and mix. Refrigerate for at least one hour to let flavors blend. Serve with tortilla chips, fish tacos, or pita wedges. Enjoy!

News Bits: submitted by readers, for readers

is produced locally, and that every year since 2004, consumer spending at local farmers markets has increased by 15%. With this information in hand, the potential for local food in WNC seems to be only beginning. Young, aspiring farmers are drawn to this area because of the success that some growers have seen, and the potential that lies ahead.

In 1991, the U.S Census Bureau deleted "farmer" as an option for an occupation. In 1910, farmers comprised over 50% of our country's population, but by 1991, farmers were less than 2% of Americans. We're all too aware of the loss of the family farm in America, and a report in the Asheville Citizen Times earlier this year revealed that WNC loses farmers at a greater rate than other regions in our state. The average age of farmers in many mountain counties is well over the national average, an already grim 55. But is the disappearance of farmers and the migration of young growers to this area really connected? Farmers who are retiring now did not seek direct-to-customer sales, and many of the markets they used are no longer available. A perfect example is the Gerber baby food plant that used to buy vegetables from many of my neighbors and their parents who farmed in McDowell County. As we build local companies that are keen on sourcing local food for their products, these avenues for local farmers may be re-opened, but the fate of our rural lands may not wait that long. In the meantime, the tailgate markets that pop up in communities across WNC offer an awesome potential for direct customer sales, even if we were able to transition all the land of those farmers retiring into the hands of young farmers ready and willing to work it, would there be markets and customers for all of us?

I have been asking this question for many years, from a farmer's perspective. I admire many other farmers whom I have come to know in WNC for the success that they have seen selling at longstanding markets, such as the North Asheville Market, and wonder if other markets in our region will see the same high numbers, customer dedication, and meaningful profits. I have been encouraged by the consistent improvement of markets in which I participate, but indeed, the number of people I encounter talking about starting a farm in WNC make me wonder if we can all end up on top. We hope, and work hard to grow the local and organic food movement to a point where prices will not be so high, or until it becomes habitual or necessary for people to pay more for healthy food. We hope and work to grow the local food movement to a broader demographic, but in the meantime, are we headed for a bottleneck, in which the many social issues such as health education, living wages, and other issues affecting people's food choices are not

Do you buy raw almonds? If so, you need to know about the issues surrounding US-produced almonds! A recent law requires all US almond farmers to "pasteurize" their almonds. The Cornucopia Institute reports that "the rule requires sanitation of almonds with a toxic fumigant or treatment with high-temperature heat. The scheme imposes significant financial burdens on small-scale and organic growers, lacks scientific justification, damages domestic almond markets, and does not address the unsustainable methods used on the industrial-scale almond orchards where the only two documented Salmonella outbreaks have occurred. And the treated almonds can still be deceptively labeled as 'raw!'" For more information about the fight for authentic almonds, visit <http://www.cornucopia.org/almonds/>

Late Blight Resources: With the early and rapid onset of late blight on many farms this season, many growers are looking for solutions. One of our favorite online growers resources, ATTRA, has a list of resources for growers on identification of the disease, and organic treatments. Visit <http://www.attra.org>.

Food Preservation: This time of year, we get hit with emails about food preservation. Looking for info about canning, freezing, drying, and other ways of making your harvest last through the winter? Check out the National Center for Home Food Preservation out of the University of Georgia. <http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/>

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being resolved as quickly as we are growing our great movement? Can all the farmers seeking to sell direct to consumers in WNC grow to the size they need to be in order to truly be profitable and sustainable?

And for heavens sake, can victory gardens hurt farmers? Surely not. It is a great and powerful thing that many people have been moved by our country's current plight, or for other reasons, to start becoming more self efficient. As Wendell Berry wrote, "The average citizen ought to be anxious...he is dependent on so many specialists, the beneficiary of so much expert help, this can only mean that he is a captive, a potential victim." In other words, we should not depend on so many experts for the success of our own lives. But if the same people who believe in fresh, healthy, local, and organic food are also those interested in self sufficiency, do we eventually preach our way out of business? As the most recent issue of Growing for Market points out in it's cover article, it is rather ironic to witness an early and widespread onset of late blight due to infected plants that well meaning home gardeners purchased from WalMart and Lowes. Again the circle is broken, and our economy leaks dollars. Farmers not only lose sales to home gardening, but they lose tomato plants, too. And when the gardens dry up, and the leaves are all spotty, do the gardeners then turn back to us, cropping up suddenly at farmers stands across the mountains, for the expert's tomatoes, the specialist's eggplants?

Before I wrote this article, a friend asked me if I thought it was a good idea to mention how the recession might be affecting farmer's market sales. Her point, a rather thoughtful one, was that blaming the recession might almost give us all an excuse to spend less. "Just like all those corporate layoffs this year. It's like one company started laying people off due to economic crisis, and all of a sudden every company is laying people off." Maybe so. But we would be foolish not to see that the little seed inside of us that makes us want local food in the first place is the same seed that would make us want to support local food even more when times get tough. This same seed makes us want to grow a garden, and hopefully buy our transplants from local, sustainable farmers, support local business who use local farm products to create their wares, thereby opening more markets for farmers, both seasoned and new.

Do you have answers? Thoughts? Comment on this article at www.organicgrowersschool.org, or TAKE OUR SURVEY to help uncover sales and buying trends at farmers markets this summer.

For customers, [TAKE THIS SURVEY.](#)

For farmers, [TAKE THIS SURVEY.](#)

Thanks for your input, and remember that buying local food is not only good for you and good for farmers, but also beats back at the very root of recession itself by closing the circle on local, sustainable economies.

» Gardener's Corner: Ask Ruth



This month, readers wondered about fall gardening, fall planting schedules, and overwintering vegetables. We've put Tom and Ruth both on this question. Their tips follow. Enjoy!

Dear Ruth,

I just moved here. I want to plant a fall garden, but I'm not sure where to start. Can you grow much around here in fall?

Looking for Inspiration in Weaverville

Dear Inspired,

You can grow a lot around here in fall and even into winter. Fall gardens include many wonderful vegetables like: onions, peas, cabbage, radishes, beets, rutabagas, spinach, turnips, mustard, kohlrabi, arugula, radicchio, lettuce, mache, carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, kale, collards, and Swiss chard. Some vegetables reputedly taste even better when grown in the fall, and collards and kale are said to be sweeter following the first frost. Garlic is planted in Oct./Nov. for harvest the following summer. Some years I have still been eating fall lettuce in March that was protected in a low tunnel covered with floating row cover.

Even though the weather is currently hot and sticky, right now is a good time to plant your fall garden. You want your plants to be mostly mature before the first frost. Check on the seed pack to see how long it takes the plant to reach maturity. Then count back that number of days from the frost date to figure out your planting date for each vegetable. I begin expecting frost in early October. Direct seeding is best for root crops and peas. Most other vegetables can be

direct seeded, or you can also start your own transplants. Transplants don't take up valuable garden space until they are planted; which leaves more time for summer vegetables to produce. If it is too late to plant seeds, buy transplants at your local garden center or farmers tailgate market. Plant seeds a little deeper in fall than in spring since the ground is warm and moisture levels are potentially low. Lettuce and spinach will not germinate above 85 degrees. Shading the seedbed will help keep the soil cooler and moister, but remove shading as soon as plants germinate so they don't get leggy.

If you are just beginning this garden, start by placing your garden in a full sun spot with good air drainage. Locate it as close to your house as possible, so that it is easy to tend and harvest, but preferably not at the bottom of a hill where frost collects. Get a free soil test through NC Cooperative Extension to determine what amendments you may need to add to your soil.

To prepare an existing garden for fall planting, remove any spring/summer crop residues from your garden. Compost everything except diseased material. I would destroy or export all diseased material. Compost seedy weeds *only* if completely confident that your compost pile reaches adequate heat levels to kill the weed seeds. Add any needed soil amendments (like lime and rock phosphate). Prior to planting incorporate some *finished* compost to boost the nutrient content of your soil. Turn your garden soil to help aerate and loosen it. Many fall vegetables require high fertility and good soil moisture for optimum growth. A side dressing of fertilizer 3-6 weeks after planting can be beneficial. If you have never grown vegetables in this spot, I would incorporate generous amounts of *fully composted* manure into your garden to enhance soil consistency and buoy nutrient levels. Consider cover-cropping areas of your garden you will not be using this fall. If you protect your plants from the first frost, we will often have several more weeks of frost-free weather.

You may experience more problems from insects and diseases this time of year because these populations have had all summer to multiply. The main problem will be cabbage worms, which love to eat any brassicas (broccoli, cauliflower, collards, kale, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, etc.). You can hand-pick the worms off the plants; then squash them or drop them in a jar of soapy water. Bt is a very effective organic insecticide that targets soft-bodied caterpillars (like cabbage worms.) It is best used as a spray. Thoroughly coat all sides of the leaves, and repeat as indicated on the label.

Fall weather is often drier. Supplement rainfall when necessary to ensure that plants receive 1" of water per week. Seedlings and transplants will require more frequent watering, sometimes even daily until well established. Mulch will help retain moisture in the soil and adds winter protection for plant roots.

Plant your garden now and look forward to fresh gourmet salads, and collards and cornbread this fall!

Ruth

Gardeners: Got a question for Ruth? [Email it to the Organic Growers School.](#)

A Note about Ruth and Tom's advice: Ruth and Tom are both successful growers in the Western North Carolina area and their advice is based on their reading or personal experience. The Organic Growers School does not guarantee results for any grower who wishes to try the tricks in this column, nor do we claim that the advice given is based on research or statistically significant data.

»»Farmer's Corner: Ask Tom



Tom—

I am planning to plant some crops for fall and winter. How should I schedule my sowing?

Thanks

-- Perplexed

Dear Perplexed –

Fall is a great time for vegetable growing but many of us feel too burned out by the weeds and heat in July and August when the planning and planting are needed. Fall crops are sweeter in general and weeds are less of a problem. My theory is that the plant sugars are a plant 'antifreeze.' It is great that you are extending your season into fall and winter.

The simple answer on scheduling is to determine the days to maturity for each of your crops and count back from when you want them to mature.

Most seed catalogs give an estimate of the time needed from sowing (or transplanting) to harvest. Using the Johnny's Selected Seeds catalog for example, they give this period and also specify if that period is for transplants or direct sowing. Back up a month to six weeks if you are growing your own transplants. Add a week or several weeks depending on how short the days will be when you intend to harvest.

A more complicated answer involves considering crop variety, hardiness, microclimate, and the type of protection that you intend to use. Day length and average daily temperature also enter into fall scheduling.

Another consideration is how much the crop likes cool conditions. Miner's lettuce, for example, hates summer and I have trouble getting it to grow past early June, but in winter it will freeze solid, thaw out, and double in size the next week. Basil in contrast will turn black when it even hears that frost is in the forecast.

Agronomists divide plants into three categories – hardy, half-hardy, and not hardy- as an indicator of their resistance to frost. Most gardening books contain a list with these headings. The Johnny's catalog uses a snowflake to indicate varieties that are particularly winter hardy. Even within a particular crop type like arugula, some are more hardy than others. Sylvetta "wild" arugula has been hardy for us in the winter.

One more consideration is the garden site and protection plans. Our frost date is about October 15 in Asheville (sooner on the peaks – later lower down.) If you watch that first frost you will find your "frost pockets" or cool places on your land. On our farm cool air drains off the north side of Spivey Mountain and sometimes leaves a streak of frost in the lowest areas when our hill slopes are sometimes spared. South-facing land is good for warmth in the fall and in the spring. Structures can reflect sun on their south side and create permafrost on their north side so pick a "microclimate" that will do well in winter.

Protection takes many forms but I usually think of:

- No protection
- Row cover
- Cold frame and
- Heated greenhouse.

The main point of row cover and cold frames are to prevent desiccation from cold, dry wind. It also helps the crop warm more slowly as the sun rises on the day after a cold night. Combining row covers inside walk-in cold frames have been

particularly effective for us.

So answering your question is complicated. The best information is what worked for you last year on your farm, so keep good notes. In ten years or so you will be able to know with some certainty to when to sow a variety of crops. Here are a few general guides to get you started at about 2000 feet (Asheville).

Heated greenhouse – sow tomatoes in June for fall harvest and in November for early spring harvest.

Cold frame – sow winter greens in late August or early September to transplant as soon as the summer crops come out.

Row cover – direct sow short season crops in September and transplant as late as early October.

No protection – we stop sowing head lettuce on August 15 but salad mix can go a few weeks later.

Space is limited here but Eliot Coleman's new book [The Winter Harvest Handbook](#) Chelsea Green (2009) is great on this topic. It's available through local books stores or Growing for Market (www.growingformarket.com.) Remember that he is in Maine so we have more sun earlier than he does.

Stay warm and eat well this winter.

-- Tom

Farmers: Got a question for Tom? [Email it to the Organic Growers School](#).

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