

Schreiber and Sons CSA Update April 4th, 2008

Hello CSAers,

The Weather. If you want to know what has been going on at the farm, let me tell you all you need to know--it is has been cold. It got down to 22 degrees Monday night. When it comes to plants and 22 degrees, nothing happens. Seeds in the soil do not imbibe water, seeds do not sprout, roots do not grow, cotyledons do not emerge, leaves do not unfurl. To put 22 degrees in perspective, this is 4 degrees colder than the record low temperature for Monday. The problem is not just the cold temperatures but also the length of time it has been cold. With the exception of the seemingly alpine temperature loving garlic, nothing has sprouted. By this time last year we had several crops that had sprouted, but not this year. If the weather does not warm up it has the potential to delay the start date for the CSA--do not worry about that yet--worrying is my job and we will cross that bridge if needed be.

As if the cold weather is not enough, the night of the 4 degrees below the previous record cold temperature the pilot light went out on the greenhouse. When we came in the next morning there was ice on the plants--this is not good. Cucumbers, eggplant, tomatoes and okra are warm weather crops and they do not take kindly to ice on their tender little cotyledons. I have attached a picture of the frost damaged cucumbers. I think the cold weather will set them back, but most of them will survive.

Another impact of the cold weather is that we used up much more propane heating the greenhouse than we projected and we have to buy another tank of fuel, so that is an additional \$2,000 expense we had not counted on.

One of my favorite poems from my childhood was "Casey at Bat." One of the lines from that poem is "Hope springs eternal from the breast of man." This line goes to the heart of agriculture and this is not an occupation for a pessimist, you have to be hopeful. If you want inspiration on the farm, you have to open your eyes..... Walking along the cold soil in the garden was the first emerging seedlings (remember our previously mentioned garlic are not seedlings). The comparably cold loving arugula is emerging. Rows and rows of tiny little arugula plants. They are beautiful.

Organic Trade Offs. We finally got our organic potting soil mix---we had to go to the Willamette Valley of Oregon to get it.

Another challenge for going organic is fertility. You can only use organic fertilizer and it has to be naturally derived. It is hard to find an organic fertilizer that contains more than 4% nitrogen an absolutely essential nutrient. Plants require it and they need a lot of it. We commonly use 36% synthetic fertilizer for our conventional production and it is made from petroleum products. It is as vital to conventional farming as table scraps to a seagull. Organic growers are always struggling to find a good source of nitrogen fertilizer and 4% is about as good as it gets. Yesterday I tracked down in Sunnyside a source of 13% nitrogen fertilizer and it is organically certified. I was so excited. This is great news. I had planned to buy another product that was 4% nitrogen. That was made of composted chicken manure. It sounds a bit unsavory but when you run your hands through it, it is hard to imagine it had ever touched a hen's cloaca. Then I asked about the source of N in the 13% wunderkind fertilizer....."oh, it is a feathermeal product and has some other ingredients," came the answer. "What other ingredients" I asked. "Well, composted chickens, leftover scraps from checking processing, composted hogs and hog processing byproducts" came the reply. "Oh" I gulped.

Going organic makes for some tradeoffs. In order to get the micronutrients, such as zinc, boron, magnesium and so on, for the organic market, you have to source a natural source. The conventional

source for this is often byproducts of manufacturing processes and they recycle the leftovers. Our organic fertilizer will end up being a mix of composted chicken and pig guts mixed with micronutrients that have been naturally derived, which I found out meant they were mined. Our conventional fertilizer comes from petroleum products made in Canada and recycled wastes from manufacturing. It makes me wonder which is the better trade off synthetic or conventional fertilizer. However, what I think is of little consequence-organic rules are the organic rules.

Planting. Although I am complaining about the cold weather, it finally hit 63 degrees today. The 5 day forecast is for a gradual warming trend. Based on that assumption, we are starting to plant the crops that can be put into 50 degree soils. Previously we have planted crops that can tolerance less than 50 degree temperatures. For example, we will be planting sweet corn. Also, we started planting the very short season crops, such as radish.

Next we start transplanting the cold hardy crops in the greenhouse. We start some cold hard crops in the green house to hurry them along and get them ready sooner. To further give them an advantage, we will be growing them under plastic tunnels. This means you will be eating bok choy in the first delivery that hopefully will be the first week of May. Not long after that will come the Napa or Chinese cabbage.

By the way, you better hope that there is a high demand for the Napa cabbage. If we end up with a lot of that plant and it grows to its full size, watch out. Look at the picture of my youngest son (Julian, age 6). He is holding a not quite fully grown Napa cabbage. A full blown one can get to be over 10 pounds.... that is a lot of cabbage.

I have attached some pictures. One is the frost damaged cukes. A second picture is a long shot of one of the rows in the greenhouse-conventional produce. The third photo is a close up of the organic plants in the greenhouse. Note the weeds amongst the plants. Also in the background you will see that the bok choy is yellow. That is due to the lack of nitrogen-we have a real problem with fertility in the greenhouse. We still have a lot to learn about organic production.

Regards

Alan Schreiber



