

Cauliflower and broccoli: making a living from fresh produce

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Gardeners and homemakers are busy harvesting and processing some of the very last fresh produce to remain on the scene before winter sets in. Cauliflower and broccoli, although available during much of the gardening season, are once again enjoying a strong demand from homemakers for serving right away or freezing for the days ahead.

Lancaster Farming went to Strasburg, Lancaster County, last week to ask a veteran fresh produce grower just what it takes to make a good head of cauliflower and a tasty bunch of broccoli. For over forty years the Rowe family has been involved in marketing fresh produce. Prior to 1944, Donald's father tended market stands and filled them with produce he raised on rented ground.

In 1944, the elder Rowe bought the fifty-some acres on the edge of Strasburg to establish his produce fields. In 1975 son Donald, present proprietor of Rowe's Vegetable Farm and Greenhouse, took the operation over. For many years the Rowes traveled to Philadelphia to handle a market stand there as well as having several in markets in Lancaster County.

In 1978 however, they sold their stand in Philadelphia and decided to concentrate on the two local stands, selling wholesale to various firms and maintaining a walk-in market at their home on the corner of Twin Elm and Bunker Hill Roads just outside the borough of Strasburg.

The property includes on its premises, a large, banked barn dating to 1904 according to a keystone in its east wall, a large frame house, four greenhouses and a sizeable chickenhouse. Most of the farmwork, however, revolves around the production of fresh produce for retail and wholesale marketing.

The Rowes go to market at Root's Tuesdays and Green Dragon on Fridays. They have an indoor stand at Green Dragon and will maintain it all year long while they discontinue going to Root's at

the end of September. They sell a wide variety of produce at the stands as well as in their modest storeroom at home. They also grow produce on wholesale orders.

Right now, though, they have broccoli and cauliflower in plentiful supply. Greenbeans are also still in production as is an ever-bearing red raspberry. Donald Rowe explained that the green beans being harvested now are probably the seventh planting for this year. He plants beans at ten day intervals as early as possible beginning in the Spring and running through to August to continue picking till frost.

The ever-bearing red raspberries produced a crop in June-July then started with more in September. The plants he has bearing now are five years old. Each late winter he cuts them back to no more than 26 inches high. They will then grow a crop for that summer.

Much of the acreage at Rowe's is double cropped with one type of vegetable going into the soil as the first finishes harvesting.

Even in the beginning of October, the work force is still busy outside picking string beans, harvesting broccoli and cauliflower, picking red raspberries, planting winter spinach and harvesting tomatoes, squash, gourds, and everything else still in the fields.

On the day this reporter went to the farm, two men were busy cutting the cauliflower and broccoli for market. The cauliflower heads were covered with the outside leaves drawn up over and around the heads and held by a rubber band to bleach or form snow-white heads. The men used sharp knives to cut the heads from the stalks leaving the leaves and rubberband intact. Rowe said he found that it was better to leave the leaves on the head to protect it from being scraped or bruised during handling.

The heads were loaded by hand onto a flatbed wagon and then moved to the packing area of the barn where they would be counted out and later sold by the dozen. If the heads are to be kept briefly



John Byers, full time employee at Rowe's Vegetable Farm, harvests the cauliflower.

before being sold, they are stored in a cool room refrigerated at a chilly 38 degrees.

Donald said he prefers the hybrid varieties of cauliflower over the standard varieties because the hybrids will withstand dry conditions better. He pointed out that he does not have the water available to irrigate as some produce growers do and has had better success in using hybrid plants. His favorite cauliflower is Snow Crown. Judging from the heads being taken from the field, Snow Crown gives a snow white, very tight, nice-sized head at harvest.

Rowe answered the question how to pick out a good head of cauliflower at the market, "Pick one that is nice and white, tight-clustered and not spotted with mildew. Mildew means the head has been around too long to be fresh."

As is the case with the cauliflower, Rowe has a favorite hybrid broccoli as well: He likes Golden Comet. This year he also planted a newly marketed variety, Ventura. Both are doing well for him despite the dry conditions his geographic area has experienced this year.

The broccoli is also harvested by hand cutting. Once reaching the packing room, the broccoli is trimmed of its outer leaves and several "centers" are secured together with a rubberband to form a compact "bunch." The bunches are of a uniform size. They are placed in cold water with stems down to keep their freshness. When the broccoli is

sold, it is counted out by bunch and packed in paperlined, wooden crates, twenty-four to a crate. That is the wholesale packing system. Local homemakers buy the cauliflower and broccoli by the head or half dozen in the case of the cauliflower and by the half-bushel or bunch for the broccoli.

Rowe explained that the consumer ought to choose a broccoli bunch by selecting one with a nice, uniform, dark green color, with tightly closed clusters. As the harvesting continues, the centers will be taken from all the plants and "shoots" or smaller clusters will grow. These smaller clusters will be banded together to make bunches. Rowe said the shoots are just as tender as the centers.

To have enough broccoli and cauliflower on hand throughout the Summer and Fall, Rowe and his workforce consisting of himself, his son Rob, his wife, their daughter, Wendy, and several local employees, transplant three times.

He starts his plants by seeding in beds south of the long chickenhouse. As the plants reach a strong root stage, they are transplanted into the fields with a tobacco planter. During the year he estimates he planted 14,000 cauliflower and broccoli plants. The first transplanting, he moved around 5,000 plants. The early and late plantings fair better because they prefer cooler rather than hot temperatures, according to Rowe.

Twice a week from transplanting to harvest, the plants are sprayed with a tractor-driven, row-crop sprayer. Rowe uses a spray with a

short residue time permitting him to harvest one day after spraying. Donald says his father continues to do the spraying for him. Irene's and Donald's older son, Rick, also helps out part-time on the farm. The day of the visit to Rowe's, Rick was planning to spray a foam-type insulation layer on some of the greenhouses the Rowes use for foliage, poinsettia, perennial and annual plants throughout the year. Their greenhouse employee, Nancy Burkhart, has foliage plants growing in one greenhouse along with flats in which are germinating allium, pansies, delphinium and other perennials.

In another greenhouse are poinsettia recently trimmed back to induce "branching" or starting fuller growth and budding. Later on these poinsettia will also fill up the next greenhouse as well.

The Rowes grow all kinds of flowering plants, potted and flats to fill orders seasonally from wholesale buyers as well as local walk-in customers. Christmas, Easter and Mother's Day are major marketing dates, but there is also demand for foliage plants in Winter and bedding plants in Spring.

Rowe said a third of his business is centered in the greenhouse and the other two-thirds in the produce from the fields he owns and rents. The chickenhouse provides a very necessary and otherwise costly requirement, fertilizer, he added.

It doesn't matter what time of year, a trip to Rowe's Farm and Greenhouse will find something growing and work to be done. This time of year they are losing their heads...cauliflower heads that is!



Donald Rowe, proprietor of Rowe's displays the center of a broccoli stalk. Donald took over the Rowe operation in 1975.

Homestead Notes