

Special Management Necessary When Growing Crops Organically

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HERSHEY (Dauphin Co.) —

Organically grown products often can bring premium prices, whether at the grocery store or at a farm stand. But growers should keep in mind that to grow food "organically" demands a rigorous system of management that focuses on obtaining natural fertilizer sources, putting up with weeds, and controlling plant diseases.

In fact, plant diseases are "probably the greatest problem for organic farmers," said Mark Dornstreich, Branch Creek Farm, Perkasie.

Dornstreich grows organic crops that he markets to select restaurants in north Philadelphia. He spoke to about 100 growers and industry representatives on Tuesday at the 1995 Pennsylvania Vegetable Conference and Trade Show at the Hershey Convention Center.

Dornstreich emphasized the importance of working closely with buyers and developing a clear marketing plan in order to have a successful organic farming business.

Organic farming basically involves the use of "non-chemical inputs," said Dornstreich. That means soil and crop inputs have to be entirely chemical-free, meaning the grower has to use no chemical-based herbicides, insecticides, and fertilizers.

Cultivation is the primary method of weed control. Dornstreich said he has learned to put up with the weeds. "We're used to seeing weeds," he said. "We don't go nuts if we see weeds."

He said when he looks at crops growing in other areas, in different operations, and sees no weeds, he begins to have "strange feelings" about the so-called weed control being used.

Also, cultivating weeds provides a mulch cover which is beneficial to soil moisture retention and for control of weeds in row.

The primary source of nutrients is through a compost made up of municipal leaves and horse manure. He said that he collects, locally, about 50-75 tons of leaves every fall. At his Bucks County location, horse manure is readily available from farms, which he collects for the compost. What is involved is a lot of "mixing and turning" to allow the microorganisms in the compost to convert the material into nitrogen for the crops.

Dornstreich said he spends a great deal of time in the fields inspecting crops for insects. He looks at the locations where insect eggs hatch (underneath plants) and scouts for larvae. He said the "farmer's footsteps" do the same job that the "sticky traps" do in counting bugs and in determining what type of insect control to use.

As an organic crop grower, Dornstreich makes use of soaps and other materials to work out insect problems. "The key is to examine the crop and to get on top of things in the early stages," he said.

In many cases, the presence of worms, such as in organically grown sweet corn, "does not put people off," said Dornstreich.

As for plant diseases, that poses a more difficult challenge. He said many organic farmers may have to learn to tolerate more problems and work on other solutions (such

as rotation) to deal with disease. Otherwise, organic growers will simply have to put up with more losses compared to more chemical-based products.

Dornstreich emphasized that the same skills, management, and production techniques used by conventional growers also apply with organic farming. But organic vegetable farming is more labor-intensive than conventional vegetable farming. He said it was more important to "look at the overall horticulture picture and not find ourselves divided up into different camps of practice."

Wellness Facts

*Carrots have twice as much beta carotene as they did in 1950 according to a report by the USDA, making them one of the best sources of this important antioxidant. Scientists are constantly improving food crops and developing new varieties.

*Using a Wok—It's well known that cooking in iron pots and pans adds iron to foods cooked in them.

But steel cookware, which is 98% iron can be just as good a source of dietary iron. A recent study at Texas Tech University in Lubbock found that stir-frying in steel woks increased the iron content of foods, usually by 200 to 500%. The iron content of 3.5 ounces of vegetables, for instance, rose from .4 to 3.5 milligrams when stir-fried in a wok.



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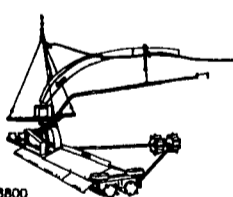
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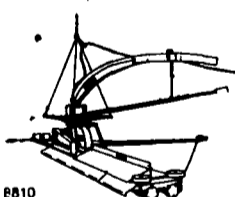
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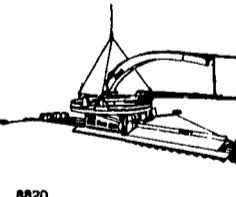
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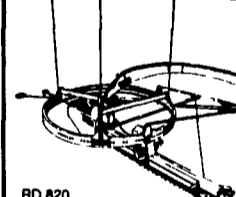
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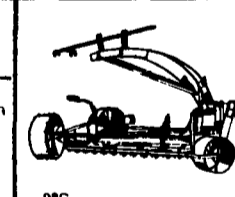
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