

**HortiCountry**  
by  
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Lancaster County  
Horticulture Agent

**ANOTHER DRY SUMMER**

Is 2001 going to be another dry growing season? I've already talked with growers that are concerned about whether they will be able to get the plow into the soil to turn under their rye cover crops. As I write this column, we're also several inches below our normal rainfall for the year and the high temperatures in late April made the situation worse. So my advice to all growers of fruit and vegetables is to start preparing for another season of heavy use of your irrigation system!

By now you should have performed normal maintenance on your irrigation system. You should not wait until your newly set crop of watermelons needs to be watered to discover that your pump is broken and the necessary part will take two days to arrive. I hope you have not needed to lose a crop to learn this valuable lesson.

If there were any persistent problems with your irrigation system last season, hopefully you have solved those already

as well. Frequent clogging of emitters or lines with a trickle system could indicate a water or filtration problem that will again re-occur this year if not corrected. Solving the problem now should help you achieve maximum results from your irrigation system. I suggest you consult an irrigation professional to help with any of these persistent problems.

Another reason to consult an irrigation professional is if you plan to make any major changes to your system or if you plan to irrigate additional acreage this season. If your system is not properly designed to provide the quantity of water needed for your crops, you could suffer from reduced yields and most likely reduced returns for that crop.

Can you afford to lose money like this? An irrigation specialist can help determine if your system can support the additional acreage or what modifications are necessary to increase the watering capacity to suit your needs.

Those new to using irriga-

tion should collect as much information as possible from other growers, industry reps, and by reading available literature. This is especially true for those new to using trickle or drip irrigation. There are many potential problems with this type of irrigation system. However, a trickle system has enough advantages to you, the grower, in order for you to learn how to operate this type of system.

**When Should I Irrigate**

This is a common question among growers. I have also asked several successful growers how they determine when they need to water and received about as many different answers as growers that I asked!

You need to remember that all fruits and vegetables are more than 90 percent water at harvest and quality can suffer quickly when water stress occurs. When it comes to determining the need to water a crop, there is no true substitute for experience. But what does a new grower do successfully grow a crop while gaining the necessary experience?

I have several suggestions to offer. First, start by collecting information. Talk with other successful growers of the crop(s) you intend to grow and learn from their experiences. There is no need to make the same mistakes they have! Also consult an irriga-

tion specialist, as they will often have information you can use. Finally read any available information of the subject, including production guides, irrigation guides, trade journals, newspaper articles, and even seed catalogs. Most of these sources will provide tips and suggestions on irrigation. Also be sure to know the critical times in the production cycle of your crop for water use. For most vegetable crops this starts at set and continues through harvest while with fruit crops it can vary with the time of the season.

Both new and experienced growers should consider using some method of monitoring soil moisture. One way to do this is to use tensiometers. I have talked with growers that have used tensiometers and I am using them myself in an irrigation study and we all agree that these devices also require some experience to use properly. However, I believe that it is worth the time to learn how to use some type of monitoring device, because what you think the current soil water status is and what the actual soil water status is can be very different. Seasoned growers can often do this based on their experiences with the crop and the weather conditions. However, a tensiometer could also help them confirm their in-

Lancaster Farming, Saturday, May 19, 2001, Grower and Marketer-7  
stincts and set "numbers" to let their hired help judge when water is needed.

A new grower can use a tensiometer to warn him or her that the soil is getting dry and water is needed before there will be any obvious symptoms of stress in the crop. Several studies have shown that by the time you see actual symptoms of water stress in your crop (color change or slight wilting), yields have been reduced.

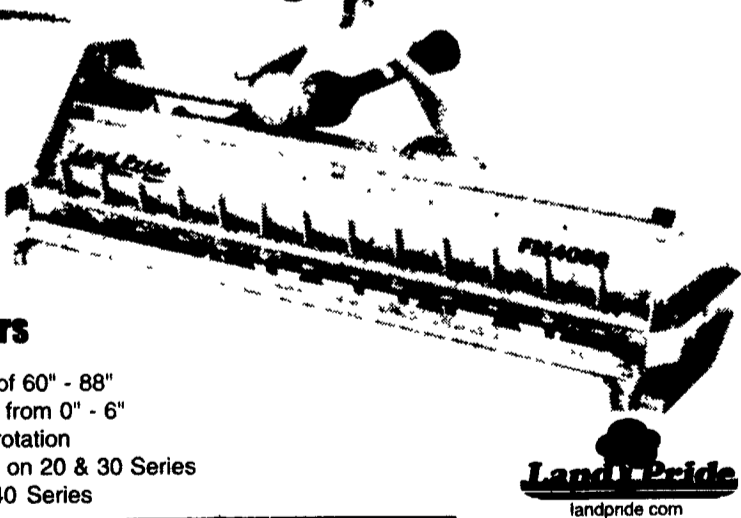
Tensiometers can be an accurate measurement of the need to water a crop and may help insure success with a new crop. By keeping records of their observations and actions, combined with a record of tensiometer readings, a new grower can begin to develop the knowledge necessary to manage the irrigation on their crops.

My experience has been that a dry season is more beneficial to fruit and vegetable growers than a wet season. By carefully managing irrigation, a grower can achieve both maximum yields and quality on their crops.

A wet season may eliminate the need to irrigate, but usually results in higher disease pressure. In addition, cloudy weather reduces the sugar content of your crop at harvest, and who wants to eat a bland melon or peach? So learn to manage your irrigation system to take advantage of a drought!

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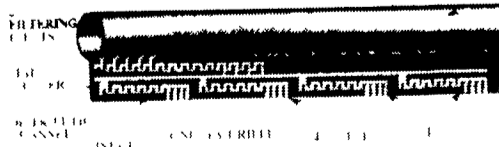
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