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ORGANIC BLACKBERRY PRODUCTION & MARKETING

Experiences of a Small NC Farm

Cheryl Ferguson & Ray Tuegel
VA Berry Production & Marketing Conference
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WE'LL BE TALKING ABOUT....

- ◉ What is Organic
- ◉ Variety Selection
- ◉ Production in an Organic System
- ◉ Marketing
- ◉ Resources

WHO'S
OUT THERE?



WHAT IS ORGANIC?



Organic is a labeling term that indicates that the food or other agricultural product has been produced through approved methods that integrate cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. Synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetic engineering may not be used.

Source: National Organic Program

WHAT IS ORGANIC AGRICULTURE?

- ◉ “An ecological production management system that promotes & enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, & soil biological activity;
- ◉ Based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain or enhance ecological harmony;
- ◉ Primary goal of optimizing the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals and people.”

Source: USDA National Organic Standard Board

ORGANIC -- *IN PRACTICAL TERMS...*

- ◉ Fertility and pest management inputs limited
- ◉ Variety selection and preventive methods more important

VARIETY SELECTION

WHICH BERRY IS FOR YOU?

◉ Who are you?

- Large-scale commercial grower
- Small farm
- Backyard grower
- Other

◉ Where are you?

- Mountains
- Piedmont
- Coast
- Example: Prime Jim[©]

WHICH BERRY IS FOR YOU?

- ◉ Who is your customer & what does she want?
 - Wholesale
 - Retail (farmers market)
 - Chefs
 - Pick Your Own
- ◉ What do you want?
 - Fresh berries
 - Frozen
 - Jam
- ◉ When do you want it?

Blackberry Varieties At A Glance

		AVAILABLE AS	BERRY SIZE	FLAVOR	FIRMNESS	WINTER HARDINESS	ZONES
Summer Bearing Blackberries	Natchez*	NM	VL	G	G	F	6-8
	Ouachita*	NM	L	E	VF	F	6-9
	Triple Crown	NM	L	E	M	F	6-9
	Chester	NM	L	G	F	F	5-9
Everbearing Blackberries	Prime-Ark® Freedom*	NM	L	E	F	F	6-9
	Prime Jim®*	NM	M-S	G	M	F	5-8
	Prime-Ark® 45*	NM	M	G	F	F	6-9

AVAILABLE AS:

NM-nursery matured plants: *Tissue culture plants set in our nursery for 8-10 weeks. Dug as dormant bare root plants.*

TC-tissue culture plants: *Clones of individually virus-indexed stock, sold as green or dormant plants.*

BERRY SIZE:

S-small / M-medium / L-large / VL-very large

FLAVOR: E-excellent / G-good / F-fair

FIRMNESS: VF-very firm / F-firm /
M-moderately firm

WINTER HARDINESS:

E-excellent / G-good / F-fair

ZONES: See Zone Map, page 10

WHAT BERRIES ARE RIGHT FOR US?

- ◉ Small farm
- ◉ Piedmont NC
- ◉ Retail, PYO, Chefs & Value-Added
 - No shipping needs
- ◉ Flavor
- ◉ Thornless
- ◉ Varieties
 - Ouachita
 - Triple Crown
 - Primoc



PRODUCTION METHODS

ORGANIC PRODUCTION

- ◉ Start with the soil
- ◉ Feed your plants
- ◉ Manage weeds
- ◉ Manage pests
- ◉ Manage disease



START WITH THE SOIL



MANAGE WEEDS

Impact of Weeds on Primocane Raspberries

NCSU study presented by Kate Jennings at NCCBRGA meeting, February 2012

		Year #1		Year #2	
	Yield (gm/cane)	# of Canes / sq ft	Cane Height	# of Canes / sq ft	Cane Height
Weed Free	80	15	59"	71	94"
WF after 5/28	72	14	25"	56	91"
WF after 6/27	20	11	23"	37	74"
Weedy	0	4	32"	15	79"

Weed Free: Kept weed-free from early Spring on.

WF after 5/28: Not weeded until 5/28. Weeded and kept weed-free after that.

WF after 6/27: Not weeded until 6/27. Weeded and kept weed-free after that.

Weedy: Not weeded at all.

MANAGE WEEDS

- ◉ Herbicides:
 - No good option
- ◉ Flaming:
 - Not effective against grasses
- ◉ Hand weeding:
 - Been there; done that
- ◉ Woven landscape fabric:
 - 4' wide weed-free strip
 - Investment minimizes labor
 - Aids disease & pest management
 - BUT: adds fertility & pest challenges



LIFE BEFORE FABRIC



LIFE WITH FABRIC



MANAGE PESTS



Photo: Hannah Burrack, North Carolina State University, Bugwood.org



Photo: Kansas Department of Agriculture Archive, Bugwood.org



Photo: Doug Stone, Mississippi State University, Bugwood.org

MANAGE PESTS

- ◉ Sanitation
- ◉ Monitoring & Trapping
- ◉ Organic Pesticides
- ◉ Timing

SANITATION



SANITATION



MANAGE PESTS

- ◉ Monitoring

- ◉ Trapping

- Not effective for SWD
- Not Japanese Beetle pheromone trapping
- Japanese Beetle Patrol
- June Bug Traps?

CHIEF RODENT OFFICER



MANAGE PESTS

- ◉ Organic Pesticides
 - Very limited options
 - Spinosad, Pyganic, Azera
- ◉ Timing



MARKETING THE CROP



FARMERS MARKET

- ◉ Bounty
- ◉ Beauty
- ◉ Samples
- ◉ Options
- ◉ Social media



PICK YOUR OWN

- ◉ Location is important
- ◉ Organic is a draw
- ◉ Teach how to pick. Give them a perfect berry.
- ◉ Encourage customers to taste in field
- ◉ Selling an experience



AGRITOURISM

- ◉ Participate in tours and on-farm events
- ◉ Be a destination



VALUE-ADDED PRODUCTS

- ◉ Jams are a way to use seconds
- ◉ Builds loyalty to fresh product

RESOURCES

◉ Books

- ATTRA: “Organic Culture of Bramble Fruits”
- NRAES: Raspberry & Blackberry Production Guide

◉ Websites

- Virginia Cooperative Extension – Small Fruits
- Team Rubus
- Southern Region Small Fruits Consortium

◉ Other Publications

- eOrganic webinar on Organic Blackberry Production
- Growing for Market
- Fruit Growers News
- NARBA Publications

THANKS SO MUCH!!

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