

# Monroe Family Organics

## CSA Newsletter

MAY 18, 2013

Hello everyone! It looks like the warmer weather is finally here to stay!

### Farm Update

This has been an abnormally long winter, and then it jumped straight to summer! This cold spring has definitely been hard on the plants, and it has been the most challenging spring of Fred's nine years growing large amounts of vegetables. We did sustain damage on a lot of our transplanted crops because the warm, summery temperatures caused the plants to be lush and tender, but then they froze pretty badly last Sunday night. Fortunately, most are once again growing vigorously out of their damage, but it was a setback. Our coldframes, though bearing their crops later than expected, have now been producing a bumper crop of greens! We've been able to provide some of our local wholesale accounts with some leafy green goodness, and we've been enjoying it too!

Most of our seeded crops are doing well, except the peas that were seeded in April, because the conditions were just too cold for too long for them to thrive. Our first planting of green beans and yellow wax beans, however, looks very nice and is far earlier than we expected. Spinach and lettuce are also doing exceptionally well. As in other springs, we are fighting the flea beetles, mostly on our bok choy. Usually flea beetles attack the plants when they are young but then become disinterested in them after the plants get older and thicker, waxier leaves are formed.

We now have a new batch of chickens added to our existing flock, and they have been having a great time chasing bugs and eating the lush spring pasture. Our new dog Josie has taken up residence in the chicken area and is doing a great job of protecting them from predators.



*We recently got our new little piggies at the farm! They like to sleep in a pile to stay warm.*

We finally got our batch of little pigs for the year, and they are now exploring their new pasture and learning how to live outside. Fred had to guide them into the shade the first day, because they did not know to get into the shade to prevent sunburn, but soon they will learn to take care of themselves.

Also this last week, we got all four of our full-time seasonal helpers! This year we have Nate Baldwin, Austin Powel, Charlie Monroe, and Joe Cecil. We are really happy to have such a strong team here to help us this season!

Our CSA membership goal for the year has been met! Thanks to all who signed up! If you haven't signed up yet but still want to, we can put you on our waiting list. Then if any shares become available later in the season, we can offer people shares at a prorated price. We've initially put a cap on the membership to ensure we are able to take care of our members and don't promise more than we can provide, but we might find later that we can accommodate more people.

*Have questions or comments? Email us at [mforganics@yahoo.com](mailto:mforganics@yahoo.com) or call Michele at*

*517-896-6884.*

## Freezing Weather and the Farm

Here in Central Michigan, we experience a lot of freezing temperatures that limit our growing season. On the farm, a freeze always stresses the farm system to some degree. It usually makes normal farm tasks take longer as Fred and the other workers struggle with frozen hands, and it requires us to harvest later in the day, when the frost has left the plant. It also affects the animals; the pigs need more food to produce enough energy to heat their bodies, and the chickens sometimes stop laying as many eggs as their bodies get stressed by prolonged below-freezing temperatures. We have to cover some plants and make sure our greenhouse, which grows our transplants, is secure and that the furnace is working. The freezing temperatures cause the use of more energy inputs, lower efficiency, damage to tender crops, and sleep loss for Fred, who often wakes up in the middle of the night to make sure the greenhouse is still warm enough. Cold weather also severely limits the number of weeks we can generate revenue from different crops (especially tomatoes).

However, even with all these setbacks, the battle against freezing temperatures has helped to make our farm unique. Fred has gained a lot of experience fighting against the freezing temps to produce high quality crops. It has set us apart, because we typically have more crops sooner, and have most crops later in the season than any other diversified vegetable farm in Central Michigan. There are a lot of nuances with growing crops during freezing periods, which we use to our advantage.



*Above: We start our seeds in flats in the greenhouse so that by the time it is warm enough to plant them in the field, they are already a few weeks into their growing cycle.*

*Below: When we plant the transplants in the field, many of them are planted into a row of black plastic, which keeps them warm.*





*Photo: Spinach is a very cold-hardy crop that can tolerate cold temperatures, so it is ready earlier in the year than many other vegetables.*



The first thing is crop selection. For example, lettuce and spinach usually do really well when they are planted during the first warmer temperatures of the spring. Even when planted in mid-March or early April, well before the last frost date, these hardy germinating seeds withstand sometimes constant freezing temperatures, and emerge usually 10-14 days later when there are a few warmer days. This seems odd to many people, who are used to putting in a garden after the last spring frost and letting their garden go after the first fall frost. However, we are able to get vegetables earlier than most because we start by planting the hardiest plants first, and then planting our most tender crops (like peppers and sweet potatoes) late in the spring after all possible frost has passed.

The next thing we do is crop protection. This starts in our coldframes (unheated greenhouses) where we seed cold-hardy crops in late February or mid-March. These crops will emerge and experience temps as low as 10F inside the protected covering, but because they are small and there is absolutely no wind to damage the brittle frozen plant tissue, these plants thrive and provide us with very early crops. Some fall crops even produce food into the winter, but they are usually less productive. We also use small plastic tunnels that are out in the field to protect and push our first plantings. These tunnels usually allow us to harvest one to three weeks sooner, and protect the plants from getting damaged by strong freezing winds that can still occur in April.

The final method is that we plant a lot of our first crops as transplants in black plastic. By first planting things like kale, chard, kohlrabi, and broccoli in flats in the greenhouse, they are already several week weeks into their growth cycle by the time it is warm enough to put them in the field. Then we plant them in black plastic, which keeps them warm until the weather gets consistently warm.

For us, the fight to produce our crops as early and as late in the year as possible is challenging. However, by being willing to take on this seemingly endless battle with the weather, we have been able to feed our family and many other families some of the healthiest produce out there, for a longer season than would ever have been possible before.