



TWO SMALL FARMS

Community Supported Agriculture

April 7, 8, 9 2010

“Organic” Strawberries from Conventional Stock? by Stephen Pedersen

Like all California strawberry growers, we grow out our berry plants each year from strawberry crowns that we plant in the fall. These crowns are runners trimmed from mother plants grown at high-elevation nurseries. We place our orders for the varieties we want early in the year and the plants typically arrive the first week in November—dry root and neatly packed, 1000 per box. Until recently, the most frustrating part of being an organic strawberry grower was that, no matter how sustainable my fertility and pest control practices were, I still had no other option than to use crowns from conventionally produced plants, along with everyone else.

Virtually all of the plants produced for the main coastal strawberry production areas in California come from nurseries in the far Northern interior of the state. And virtually all of those nurseries fumigate with methyl bromide prior to planting. Despite a planned phase-out of this of this ozone depleting chemical by 2005 under the Montreal Protocol, the Strawberry Commission lobbied for, and received, a critical use exemption and it continues to be used widely to this day.

So, I was excited when I got word that the Prather Ranch—a family-run organic beef cattle operation located North of Mount Shasta, was beginning to produce organic plants.

Excited, but cautious none the less. Like most growers, I am resistant to making wholesale changes in my production scheme without feeling fairly confident of my chances for success. I had heard the stories about growers who lost their entire crop due to diseased nursery stock. And with so much invested in the labor, drip-tape, mulch and tractor work to prepare the field for planting, it would be foolish to risk everything on an unknown entity. So that first season, three years ago, I only ordered a few boxes to trial alongside my conventional plants. My first pleasant surprise came upon opening up the boxes before planting in fall. The crowns were large and uniform, with thick healthy root systems. I was further surprised by how they performed throughout the season. They kept pace with the conventional plants in every way.

For the last two seasons I have used Prather plants almost exclusively and without a doubt they have been the two best berry crops I have planted. The plants have been vigorous, productive and disease free. So it came as quite a blow this year when I heard that Prather—the only organic nursery in the country—was bringing their strawberry plant production to a halt. I gave James Rickert, the nursery manager, a call to find out why.

What he said pretty much confirmed my suspicions—production wasn't the problem. Because the Prather Ranch produces organic hay in addition to pastured beef, they manage a large land base. James told me that to minimize the risk of soil-borne diseases infecting the plants, he had established a ten year rotation, meaning ten years would pass before the nursery plants would be planted in the same place and that the ground would be grazed or used to grow hay in the intervening years. Knowing

what I do about disease management, this is about as ideal a growing strategy as you could ask for.

No, the problem was that growers weren't buying the plants. Even though organic production of strawberries in California tripled between 2005 and 2009, James told me that large quantities of his beautiful plants sat unsold in the cooler this winter. This didn't surprise me either. I had a conversation with a large-scale organic grower several months ago who regards organically grown nursery stock with great suspicion. He was afraid that because the ground they were planted into wasn't fumigated, that they will harbor diseases that would infect his fields.

Because the certifying agencies are not making the use of organic plants mandatory, the prevailing attitude among growers seems to be “why should I stick my neck out?”

James told me that of all the “public,” or non-patented varieties, planted for organic production in 2009, less than 6% were from his organic plants. Less than 2.5% of the Albion variety, which at 383 acres makes it by far the most widely planted public variety for organic production in the state, came from organic stock.

And then there is Driscoll's. The company that claims to grow “The World's Finest Berries” (a claim that I would respectfully disagree with) is tight-lipped about its production practices. What is known, however, is that they are far and away the largest single marketer of organic strawberries, they grow almost entirely their own proprietary varieties in their own nurseries, and that few of their nursery plants are organically grown.

Clearly, the responsibility lies with the certifying agencies. Using organic plants needs to be part of the very definition of what an organic berry is. The growers will only take the leap and use organic planting stock if they are all required to at the same time, perhaps with a schedule to convert an increasing percentage of their nursery crowns to organic over a period of several years.

The good news is that James told me that if the use of organic plants were to become mandatory for a farm to call their strawberries organic, then he would be able to resume production. He estimates he could produce at least 50% of the demand for organic strawberry crowns in California. Once the market is there, no doubt other organic nursery stock strawberry growers would also begin production.

This Week

Carrots ^{MF}

Salad Mix ^{HG}

Green Garlic ^{MF}

Snap or Snow Peas OR Young

Fava Beans ^{MF}

Orach OR Erbette Chard (Wed) ^{MF}

Young Erbette Chard (Th/Fr) ^{MF}

Strawberries OR Cauliflower ^{HG}

Tokyo Market Turnips ^{HG}

Flowers: Tulips, Ranunculus, and Sweet Williams ^{TF}

Prather has proven that it's possible to grow high quality disease-free plants organically. It'll be a huge step backwards if the small strawberry growers now have to return to using conventional plants because the large growers were not held to a high enough standard. Hopefully, the organic certifying agencies will understand their role in pushing organic strawberry growers to be completely organic.

Recipes and Notes

(see www.mariquita.com/recipes for more recipes)

Put everything into your fridge as soon as you return home. Separate the turnip greens from the turnips; eat the turnip greens like you would rapini.

Orach is a purple tinged relative to spinach. Use it like you would spinach or chard, either cooked or raw in a salad. Like any cooking green the orach and the chard can be cooked simply. Just wash the greens, chop them coarsely, and sauté with olive oil and garlic until wilted. Add a little black pepper and a splash of balsamic vinegar if you like.

If you get baby fava beans, the short answer is to toss the whole pods with oil and salt then either bake ('roast') them, grill them, or sauté them as in Jonathan's recipe below. Then eat them whole. Super yummy!

Baby Fava Beans, from chef Jonathan Miller

Baby favas don't require all the labor of shelling and peeling that the mature beans do. A simple, hot sauté works great. You want to do this over really high heat to give a little char here and there to the pods. Some people like garlic with their favas, and your green garlic this week would work really well. Use plenty of olive oil in a large skillet and heat it up good and hot. Toss in the favas and begin to sauté them briskly. Give them a generous hit of salt and toss in the green garlic about halfway through cooking them (it usually takes around 5-7 minutes to cook these babies, so plan accordingly). Serve them right away. They are best, in my opinion, eaten by hand as a first course or appetizer, and really are best hot. You could really gussie them up by chopping them and topping some crostini with them (either with additional olive oil or a ricotta spread), but straight up is my favorite way of eating them. You can also try tossing in a bit of lemon zest, or a pinch of crushed chili flakes with the garlic. Some people like that, too!

Orach Pasta

2 cups cleaned and lightly chopped orach leaves	1 onion, chopped (you can use chopped garlic instead, but add it later so it doesn't burn)
S & P to taste	Olive oil to taste
2 cups hot cooked pasta, twirly shapes work best, the greens don't mix well with long straight spaghetti and fettuccine	fancy but optional additions: roasted pine nuts or walnuts, crumbled blue or other cheese, grated parmesan, etc.

Sauté the onion/garlic in the moderately hot oil (about 1-2 Tablespoons) til soft, add the greens and the S & P. Add garlic now if you're using it. Cook until the greens are wilted, about 2 minutes, depending on how hot your pan is. Mix with the hot pasta, and optional additions if you're using any of them. Serve.

Chard Enchiladas, adapted from Ellen Ogden, *The Cook's Garden* catalog.

2 TBS canola or other cooking oil	2 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped
1 onion, peeled and chopped	4 cups chard, coarsely chopped (1 large bunch)
1 TBS butter	1 TBS flour
½ cup milk	½ cups cheddar cheese, grated
6 corn tortillas	½ cup mild or hot salsa

Preheat oven to 375 F. Heat oil; sauté garlic and onion until golden. Add chard (in small amounts) until it is cooked down. Make a bechamel sauce: melt butter, stir in flour, add milk and cheese. Stir until thick, then mix into cooked greens. Fill center of each tortilla, roll up, place in lightly oiled baking dish. Spread salsa over all; bake in hot oven for 25 minutes.

Roast Whole Baby Carrots, from chef Jonathan Miller

Toss baby carrots with some olive oil and salt, throw them in the oven at 425 for about 20-30 minutes and eat them like candy. Yum! You can also serve them with chicken or pork - they are super with meat. Try not to trim them (except for the greens)—they look really good whole.

Braised Baby Turnips and Carrots, from Alice Waters' *Chez Panisse Vegetables*

A very simple stewing is all that is wanted for very tiny and delicate turnips and carrots. Wash and trim the vegetables. Both should be tender enough to make peeling unnecessary. Trim off the carrot tops but leave a half inch or so of the stalks. Leave the tender turnip greens attached, trimming off only the leaves that are wilted or damaged. Put the young roots in a saucepan with a little butter and water, and stew gently, covered, until softened but not overcooked. Season with salt and pepper and serve. This is especially nice if you have a variety of carrots of different shapes and colors.

Green Garlic Soup, adapted from Richard Olney's leek and potato soup in *Simple French Food*

1 pound green garlic	4 TBS unsalted butter
1 lb russet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1 inch cubes	Salt and pepper to taste
1½ quarts chicken broth	

Discard the dark green leafy parts of the green garlic, leaving the white and pale green parts. Cut each garlic in half lengthwise, then mince. Melt the butter in a large saucepan over moderate heat. Add the minced garlic and sauté for about 5 minutes to soften. Add potatoes, season with salt and pepper, then add chicken broth. Bring to a simmer, cover and adjust heat to maintain a gentle simmer. Cook until potatoes are tender enough to mash with a wooden spoon, about 40=20 minutes. Mash the potatoes into the broth, or puree in a food processor, then reheat. Taste and adjust seasoning before serving. Serves 6.

From Mariquita Farm: Carrots, peas, fava beans, orach, erbetto chard, green garlic. From High Ground: Strawberries, cauliflower, salad mix, turnips. From Thomas Farm: flowers.