ORGANIC FRUIT GROWERS Association

Just Picked

VOLUME 12, ISSUE 2 December 2016

From the Coordinator's Desk

Greetings Fruit Growers!

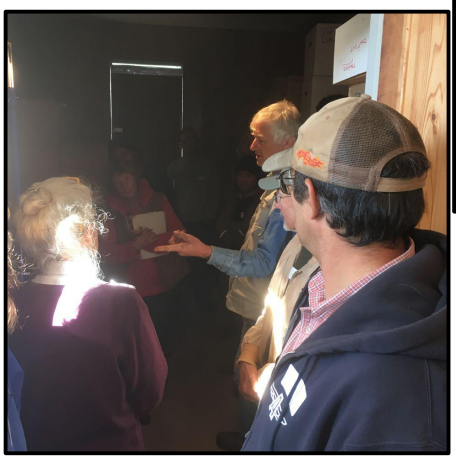
At our farm, at least, we're pretty happy to shut the door on the 2016 season!

A killing frost in May and heavy summer rains made for a difficult year for fruit growers in the region. It was a season heavy on learning – a look back at the listserv from the spring and summer show a lot of discussion on borers symptoms of frost damage on fruit, weed control and groundcover, and uncommon fruit varieties. Don't forget, listserv messages are all archived on the yahoo site, so you can go back and read them any time. Whenever I look through them, I'm reminded of the great store of wisdom embodied in our network, and the value of such a resource.

We had a couple of great field days this year – see the next page for a summary of our summer tour of Atoms to Apples and Two Onion Farm – including a fall day focused on value-added processing at Blue Heron Orchard. Thanks to our board members for hosting, and for everyone who travelled to both events! This winter, we'll start planning for 2017 events. If you have something you'd like to see covered, or a place you'd like to visit, you can send me suggestions at any time.

In the coming weeks, watch for notices on our winter events, including a growers' retreat, annual meeting, cider tasting, and scionwood exchange.

Look forward to reconnecting with you this winter!



Left: Dan Kelly shows cold storage, and packaging and labeling of products at Blue Heron Orchard
Above: Presentation on the Value Added Producer Grant by Matt Moore from USDA Rural Advantage
Photos by Rachel Henderson

INSIDE This Issue :

Keep up with events and other news at our website organicfruitgrowers.org!

Have a newsletter story or idea to share?

Email
Rachel Henderson
OFGA Coordinator at
Henderson.r@gmail.com

Recap of OFGA Summer Field Day, One Grower's Perspective

By Aaron Wills, Little Hill Berry Farm

In June, OFGA held a field day on advanced orchard management at Atoms to Apples and Two Onion Farm in Southwest Wisconsin. In this article I'm not going to be able to give a full recap of everything that was covered at the field day (June was so long ago!). Instead, I'm going to share what I found most interesting and how the field day will impact my farming.

What I enjoyed most about the field day was that it was rare combination of getting to see young orchards managed by very experienced growers. Most field days I've attended are either at a farm that is well established (the plantings older, farm has established markets, the farmers have a lot of experience) or it is a new farm (younger plantings, still establishing markets, farmer still learning production systems).

While both orchards are high density, there were some key differences in production practices and how they were laid out. Atoms to apples has trellises for tree support and uses clean cultivation in the apple rows. Two Onion Farm uses tree stakes for tree support and mulch in the tree rows.

Rami from Atoms to Apples shared great information about site preparation, trellising, training the trees, and managing tree vigor. I took away the lesson that the first couple years are crucial in training the trees and managing their vigor. If you don't stay on top of it the first couple years you will be playing catch for a long time. Rami also gave a quick real basic estimate of the cost of planting the orchard per tree. Taking into account the cost of the tree, trellis, miscellaneous fittings, and irrigation, he estimated it cost him about $15 per tree. I thought this was a helpful starting point for estimating establishment cost of a high density orchard.

Above: Rami Aburomia discussing his high-density apple orchard during the field day
Right: Trellised apple trees at Atoms to Apples
Photos by Rachel Henderson

OFGA Summer Field day
Continued...

On our farm we currently grow blueberries (with plans for putting in an apple orchard in 2018). We've struggled with grass from the aisles migrating into the mulched rows. Both farms had equipment I had never seen before to deal with this problem. Both farms used a relatively simple implement with a lilliston cultivator to cultivate an edge between the aisle and row. Atoms to Apples implement ran alongside the tractor so it is easy to see what is happening as you are driving. Two Onion Farm had a toolbar setup that had two cultivators on it which would allow cultivating two rows at a time.

Two Onion Farm markets their apples as an add-on to their well established vegetable CSA. 65% of their members choose the apple add-on. This seemed like a great market that apple growers could utilize whether or not they have a CSA or partner with nearby CSAs.

Above: Chris McGuire discussing field prep and maintenance of apple plantings at Two Onion Farm. Photo by Rachel Henderson

Right: Implements used for cultivation in apple rows at both orchards. Photos by Aaron Wills

What's Going on with GMO Apples?

By Rachel Henderson, Mary Dirty Face Farm, OFGA Coordinator

This summer congress passed, and President Obama signed into law, a bill to regulate labeling food that contains genetically engineered ingredients, or GMOs. GMO labelling has been a hot topic with many state-level campagns, and this bill has been known by many in the movement as the DARK Act – Denying Americans the Right to Know. This federal law overrides state initiatives in Vermont, Connecticut, Maine, and Alaska that required clear GMO labeling, and also pre-empts other states from pursuing legislation for more comprehensive labeling requirements. Under the DARK Act, GMO ingredient information does not have to displayed on packaging, but only has to be available (via QR code or other means) online or by phone. It has garnered additional criticism because it may exempt some GMO ingredients from being labeled at all, such as highly processed sweeteners and oils.

This law was fiercely opposed by most consumer and environmental advocacy organizations. According to Food and Water Watch, 90% of Americans support mandatory labeling and universal transparency for genetically engineered food. However, the final DARK act had active and vociferous support from the Grocery Manufacturers Association, Monsanto, and other food and biotech corporations. It also enjoyed support from some organizations that do oppose GMOs in food, who view it as an imperfect first step toward a practical labelling law.

The law does not impact the exclusion of GMOs from the USDA's organic standards. Organic produce and products remain reliably safe from GMO ingredients. Still, many people in organic agriculture are concerned about the impact of a growing roster of GMOs in our food system. Of particular note this year are newly released genetically engineered apple varieties. A GMO apple variety released in 2015, and another said to be in the works, have been engineered to reduce the concentration of polyphenol oxidase, a compound in apples that reacts with other polyphenols to turn the flesh of the fruit brown when cut or bruised. According to proponents, browning results in large amounts of loss every year, though it's unclear if that loss is suffered by growers or by food manufacturers.

It's not only organic growers who are unexcited about GMO apples. The US Apple Association, and the Northwest Horticultural Council -- which represents growers in the Pacific Northwest, where the lion's share of both conventional and organic apples is grown – are concerned about the impact of GMO apples on their members' markets. This includes the export market, as many countries, including the European Union, ban genetically engineered products all together. Some have also expressed uncertainty about the impact this particular engineering has on the apples' nutritional quality. Polyphenols, among other secondary compound in fruits and vegetables, have been identified as powerful antioxidants. There is also research suggesting that these compounds play a role in helping plants fight insect damage and environmental toxins.

While the apple varieties have already been approved and released, there are still efforts underway to limit their presence in the marketplace, mainly by appealing to food retailers and manufacturers to commit to avoiding them. Friends of the Earth http://www.foe.org/projects/food-and-technology/genetic-engineering/no-gmo-apples has more information.

For further reading:
https://www.organicconsumers.org/news/dark-act-fact-sheet
http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/news/president-obama-signs-dark-act-law
http://www.arcticapples.com/how-did-we-make-nonbrowning-apple/

The Fruit and Nut Compass: Developing Tools and Guiding Principle for Diversified Farms

By Matthew Raboin, University of Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems

Have you ever literally done your farm's financial projections on the back of an envelope? Perhaps you quickly Googled the costs of buying your planting material and you made some educated guesses about likely yields and sales prices. You pulled out your calculator, punched in a few numbers and thought, "Wow! I can make some money on this!"

If this was your approach, you might have later found that reality didn't quite line up with the numbers on your envelope. I've done enough economic analysis and have worked with enough small businesses to know that the finer details really do matter. Undervaluing costs such as labor, equipment, marketing expenses, cold storage and transportation costs can lead to unrealistically optimistic profit margins, and tweaking these values can quickly reveal much narrower margins or even net losses.

Wouldn't it be nice if you had a tool that helped you think through these finer details and make more realistic projections before you invest your hard-earned money in a new venture?

Well, we have good news for you! The University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) just received a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant to produce just such a tool. Called "The Fruit and Nut Compass" the tool will provide a flexible template for you to carefully consider the potential profitability of multiple crops and marketing channels separately and as a combined enterprise.

The Fruit and Nut Compass builds on the previous success of the Veggie Compass (http://www.veggiecompass.com) and extends it to fruit and nut crops. The project team will be led by Mike Bell, Director of CIAS, and it includes two of the original authors of the Veggie Compass (John Hendrickson and Jim Munsch), an outreach specialist (me), a perennial agriculture guru (Keefe Keeley, Director of the Savanna Institute), an agroecology graduate intern (Leah Potter Weight), and faculty advisors in Agricultural and Applied Economics (Paul Mitchell), Horticulture (Amaya Atucha), and UW Extension (Jason Fischbach). The project team also includes farmer collaborators who will field test the Fruit and Nut Compass tool so that it can be better tailored to the needs of growers. Farmer collaborators include Clare Hintz of Elsewhere Farm, Dale Secher of Carandale Farm, Rachel Henderson and Anton Ptak of Mary Dirty Face Farm, and Grant Schultz of Versaland and New Farm Supply.

Over the course of this two-year project, we will develop the Fruit and Nut Compass tool, write a user's manual, and create how-to videos that explain the tool. These will all be available on a project website. We will also conduct in-person training workshops and provide technical assistance to users of the Fruit and Nut Compass.

We also understand that farming "success" is about more than just numbers and finances, so in addition to developing the Fruit and Nut Compass Tool, we will also be interviewing fruit and nut farmers around the region to better understand how they define success and what factors have led to or impeded their progress. Through these interviews we will pull out a series of guiding principles and lessons learned that will be summarized in a research report and highlighted in case study videos that will be available on the project website.

Taken together, the tool and principles that the project will develop will serve as a "compass" to help point farmers in a general direction for success. We hope that it proves useful for many of you. Feel free to contact me, Matt Raboin, at with any questions about the project.

Midwest School for Beginning Apple Growers

WHEN: March 10, 11 and 12, 2017

TIMES: 9–4:30 Friday; 9–4:30 Saturday; 9–4:30 Sunday

LOCATION: University of Wisconsin-Madison

COST: $325

Our intensive, three-day course gives you a realistic picture of what it takes to run a successful orchard operation—including capital, management, labor and other resources. Topics include market opportunities and marketing strategies, orchard design and establishment, pest and disease management, equipment and labor needs, and financial realities.

- A unique program that combines knowledge from experienced growers and UW faculty
- Opportunities to understand essential concepts in apple production and what it takes to organize and succeed in this type of business
- Extended time with three experienced growers, each offering unique perspectives, invaluable tips and practical know-how
- A chance to network and learn from fellow orchardists, farmers and entrepreneurs

Is this workshop right for you?

This course is intended for people who are serious about starting an orchard business in the Midwest. To learn more about whether this class is a good fit with your experience and goals, contact Matt Raboin at the Center for Integrated Agri-cultural Systems, UW-Madison, (608) 630-7458 or raboin@wisc.edu.

Register and pay online at:

https://uwccs.eventsair.com/apple2017/reg

Autumn Views

Above: Cider pressing at Alternative Roots Farm
Right: Board member John Knisley picking late season apples
Photos by Brooke Knisley

Events!

Organic Fruit Growers Association Winter Retreat

February 22-24th, 2017

OFGA will host a two-day growers' retreat prior to the MOSES Organic Farming Conference, in the Driftless area, near LaCrosse WI. Please watch the listserv and website!

OFGA Annual Meeting

February 23rd, 2017

Watch for details of our annual membership meeting, to be held in conjunction with the retreat and MOSES conference. All are welcome to attend the meeting, but only current members may vote. At the meeting, we will discuss 2017 events, organization financials, and committees.

Rural Development Webinar

Hard Cider in the North Central Region – Opportunities for Rural Development

December 6th, Online

This webinar will share and discuss survey results focused on recent and projected industry trends, sourcing of apples, marketing and distribution approaches, constraints and opportunities within the industry, and research and outreach preferences of cider makers. This is a free webinar and no registration is required.
http://www.cias.wisc.edu/hard-cider-in-the-north-central-region-industry-survey-findings-and-opportunities-for-rural-development/

Wisconsin Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference

January 22-24th, Kalahari Resort, Wisconsin Dells, WI

Sessions for apple, berry, grape, fresh vegetable growers, wineries and farmers markets. Conference cost is $85 per person, which includes all sessions and the trade show.

Minnesota Organic Conference

January 12-13th, St. Cloud, MN

Workshops of interest to fruit growers include

- Spotted Wing Drosophila: What We've Learned in 5 Years, Thaddeus McCamant
- Organic Apple Orcharding for the MN Hard Cider Industry, Jim and Debbie Morrison of Sapsucker Farm

MOSES Organic Farming Conference

February 23rd-25th, LaCrosse, WI

Workshops of interest to members include

- Pruning for Organic Fruit Production, Thaddeus McCamant
- Manage Spotted Wing Drosophila, Aaron Wills and Mary Rogers
- Organic Farmers Alliance, Theresa Podoll and Michael Sligh
- Crop Insurance for Organic Producers, Roxann Brixen
- Federal Programs that Support Organic, Ben Bowell and Carissa Spencer