

Restaurateur turns to grower

Good stuff from the greenhouse

by Hugh Maynard

David Cohlmeier will consider just about any possibility in order to improve production in his greenhouse operation, including the playing of new age sounds to enhance the 'working' atmosphere of the plants. He didn't notice any difference in the results but figures that the small investment in a cassette tape was worth the try.

Trained as an industrial engineer and experienced as a restaurant operator, Cohlmeier has combined this diverse background to develop a thriving farm business in Cookstown, Ontario that supplies more than a dozen different organically-grown salad greens to gourmet restaurants in the southern part of the province. Having expanded the greenhouse space from 10,000 to 16,000 sq. ft. this past winter, he is planning on adding another three acres to the existing seven for summertime production of horticultural crops.

Cohlmeier's venture into the organic greenhouse business was, in part, stimulated by his difficulties as a restaurateur in finding quality supplies of fresh vegetables. "I had trouble finding a carrot that tasted like a carrot. I knew that home-grown carrots tasted good but I couldn't find anything like that," he remarked.

As a consequence, Cohlmeier's production methods have been driven by quality concerns and marketing strategies have been directed toward buyers interested in a quality product.

Keeping cool

The largest proportion of greenhouse production is dedicated to salad greens: lettuce, cress, mustards, carrots, kohlrabi, fennel, beets and other "green tops" harvested at an immature stage and bagged in different mixes for delivery to restaurants as ready-to-eat salads.

Because the plants don't reach maturity for harvesting, Cohlmeier has found that heat is not as critical a factor for year-round production. In fact, the warmer the greenhouse, the more the quality tends to diminish and keeping the greens "hard" improves the quality as well as reducing pest problems, such as aphids.

The new greenhouse addition has been built as a "minimally-heated" unit that will be using only solar heating up until at least the Christmas period. Cohlmeier's experiment is based on his experience last winter when one of the greenhouse furnaces ran out of fuel: "I was surprised at how little damage there was to the plants," he noted.

Certified organic by OCIA for the last four years, a composting 'pen' has been erected in one corner of a greenhouse for the recycling of earth. Once harvested of green tops, the earth is removed as sods which are stacked upside down in the pen, interspersed with other waste plant material. As the stacks are composted, the earth is removed and re-spread in the beds for seeding again; as the pen is emptied out at one end, it is then filled in with new sods to start the cycle over again.

Not too fast

Cohlmeier believes that one way to spoil success is to expand too quickly, a dictum especially true with organic horticulture as there are no quick fixes, e.g. fertilizers, herbicides, to remedy production problems. His plan has been to clear an additional acre of land for summer production each year, an objective thwarted by the poor weather of 1992 but one he hopes to catch up on in 1993.

Again, the emphasis is placed on crops that can be delivered to restaurants, as well as the Knives & Forks Organic Market in Toronto, in quality condition. Tomatoes, potatoes, leeks, endives, beets, white turnips, kohlrabi, Jerusalem artichokes, carrots, burdock, dahlia roots, French breakfast radishes and Shanghai pokchoi are part of the growing list of produce offered by Cookstown Greenhouses.

A root cellar is used to extend the delivery season of root crops, which now comprises a weekly trip into Toronto as well as daily courier deliveries to other restaurants in southern Ontario. Using courier services allows more time to dedicate to production without losing markets from late deliveries.

Cohlmeier remembers, as a restaurateur, having organic farmers showing up at six o'clock in the evening with a truck load of zucchinis, looking to unload. "I bought them to support the organic movement but it's no way to market your produce," he says.

In fact, Cohlmeier asserts, organic farmers have to pay more attention to marketing their produce. He says that just because a product is organic doesn't mean that it's any better, citing the example of beets grown without irrigation which can often be dry and tough.

"Most organic growers are falling down in educating customers as to what makes organic better," he adds, noting that perhaps five percent of the market will buy organic produce regardless of any other factors. That, he says, misses another potential ten percent who want quality first and are willing to pay for it, organic or not.

In addition, he's always looking at new types of produce because invariably a machine-harvested crop ends up on the market from California, often at half the price. Cohlmeier's produce may be of better quality, but even that is not always sufficient to keep customers with such a large price differential; having new items is one way of keeping clients.

