Remembering Dr. Rutledge

While we are deeply saddened by the loss of Dr. Al Rutledge, his legacy will live on in the vegetable industry of Tennessee. I had the great privilege of meeting and visiting with Dr. Rutledge in his hospital room one afternoon about a month ago. I learned more from him in that one afternoon, than I learned from all my years in school. His reputation and knowledge of the Tennessee vegetable industry are unsurpassed. Whenever I visit with any farmers in this state, his name invariably comes up, with mention of how he made their farm operations more successful. He published countless extension bulletins from the production of asparagus to zucchini, with all vegetables in between. He said he used to visit farms all day and then right up a bulletin on a new, potential vegetable crop for TN in his hotel room at night. He is not only remembered for the researcher and extension specialist that he was, but even more so for the person that he was. He told me, “It doesn’t matter how much you know. First, you must show people how much you care.” Dr. Rutledge, you will be missed.

What’s new?

Vegetable Market Prices
I have received several calls in recent weeks on where to find the current market prices of various vegetables. Dr. Charlie Hall, UT Horticultural Marketing and Management Extension Economist, provides several good resources on his website, The Horticultural Business Information Network (www.utextension.utk.edu/hbin/). One of those sites is ‘Today’s Market Prices’. It provides daily price information on more than 200 fruits, vegetables and herbs from several wholesale markets in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and Europe. The price information on this site is available by subscription with a 7-day free trial at: www.todaymarket.com.

The USDA also provides free daily fruit and vegetable market news (FOB and wholesale price reports) at: http://marketnews.usda.gov/portal/fv.

TN Agricultural Enhancement Program– Producer Diversification Cost Share Program
The purpose of this program is to increase farm income in TN by encouraging producers to expand and improve their operations through production of diversified agricultural products. This goal will be achieved by providing cost share funds for farmers to install farm infrastructure, purchase specialty equipment and market their diversified farm products.

Diversified agricultural products include agritourism, aquaculture, bees, fruits and vegetables, goats and sheep, horticulture, organics, value-added products, viticulture, and others as approved by the TDA.

For more information on how to apply, see ‘Upcoming Events’ on page 4.

June Issue of USDA ‘Vegetables and Melons Outlook’ Released
The USDA is predicting a strong year for sweet potato growers, with both higher prices and production. To read more, visit: www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/VGSI.
Packaging: Biodegradable Options on the Rise

Often times these days, when you get home from the grocery store and unwrap your produce, you have enough Styrofoam and plastic to fill up the garbage can. Well, biodegradable packaging is on the rise! And it makes sense, whether you are an organic or a conventional grower. Organic growers don’t want to grow a product without the use of petroleum products and then turn around and market their product in a package made from petroleum. Conventional and organic growers alike are interested in saving themselves money. Traditional plastic (polyethylene terephthalate, or PET) has seen price increases of 30-80% in the last two years due to increases in the price of petroleum. Now, there are several alternatives, such as corn-based and palm fiber packaging. Polylactic acid (PLA) is a corn-based resin that can be used to make clamshells, wraps and other packages. NatureWorks in Blair, NE is the leader in this kind of packaging. Their product is used by companies like Newman’s Own and Wild Oats. This year Wal-Mart has jumped on the bandwagon and will replace 114 million clear, PET plastic clamshell containers with PLA containers for cut fruits, herbs, strawberries and brussel sprouts. This demand for biobased plastics has doubled NatureWorks sales each year since 2004.

Even so, PLA won’t break down in your compost pile in the backyard and cannot be recycled with PET plastics. Therefore, it has to be sent to industrial composting facilities, where heat and humidity are closely controlled. There are other compostable alternatives though, like the palm fiber packages made by Earthcycle, a Vancouver, Canada based company. Their containers, made from the waste material left over after the palm fruit is harvested for oil, degrade in backyard compost in less than 90 days. These containers come from a renewable resource, as each tree fruit twice a year.

Earthcycle also has contracts with Wal-mart and Wild Oats, as well as Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods and Publix. In the past, palm fiber has been considered waste and was incinerated, causing environmental problems. Now it can be reused as a container. The corn-based containers do have an advantage over the palm fiber containers, in that they can hold high-water products (lettuce, cut fruit) and they are see through. Also, the palm fiber packaging cannot be produced locally, as the raw materials come from Malaysia, where the palms are produced. While neither alternative is perfect, they are both a step in the right direction.

Weather Report

Well, I wish everyone got as much rain as I drove through going West on I-40 on Tuesday afternoon, but once again, some guys have all the luck, while others received nary a drop.

The 7-day forecast looks to be much of the same—dry, hot weather, with a few folks getting a shower here and there.

That’s good news though for the ‘Tobacco, Beef and More’ Field Day coming up on Thursday, June 28th at the Highland Rim Research and Education Center in Springfield. Come out and see our synergistic, bi-color sweet corn variety trial, as well as plenty of information on beef, tobacco, small fruits and soybeans. The fun starts at 7:30 AM. For more details, visit: http://agriculture.tennessee.edu/news/releases/0705-HRREC%20Field%20Day.htm.

For most of the week, high’s will remain in or close to the 90’s across the state, with lows in the upper-60’s. This week in the ‘Fruit and Pest News,’ Dr. Steve Bost mentions that many people have been seeing leaf roll in their tomatoes. Leaf roll is a physiological phenomenon related to moisture conservation by the plant during extreme heat and drought and is not harmful to the plant. Even though the tomatoes are curling up from it, this weather, along with proper irrigation, will ensure that the watermelons and sweet corn will be ready for the Fourth of July. Start practicing for the seed spitting contest now!
Question of the Week

Q: How can a grower control white grubs in sweetpotatoes organically? - W.B.

A: White grubs are the larvae of Scarab Beetles (i.e., June and May Beetles) and live in the soil and feed on whatever plant material may be in their path, such as a sweetpotato. The damage they leave behind are large, shallow channels on the surface of sweetpotatoes. Cultural controls for white grubs are your best bet to manage this pest organically. First, variety selection can aid in the control of white grubs. A few years ago, Clemson University released the ‘White Regal’ sweetpotato, a long-storing variety with resistance to many disease and insect pests. This dry-fleshed variety is said to have high resistance to fusarium wilt and the southern root-knot nematode. It also, reportedly, shows resistance to internal cork virus, sclerotial blight, white grub larvae, wireworms, and cucumber beetles.

Another tool in the white grub control toolbox is site selection for your sweetpotato field. Avoid planting your sweetpotatoes in land that was previously in fallow or pasture for the past two years. Grasses are notorious habitats for white grubs, so planting sweetpotatoes into any land with a history of heavy grass production is asking for trouble. Crop rotations of 3 or more years are also a good idea, not only for white grubs, but also many other insect pests. Cleaning up the field immediately after harvest and disking under plant residues can also reduce the food sources for many insect pests. All of these tools combined, can help to reduce pest populations in your sweetpotatoes organically.


Do you have a vegetable question?
Send it to: awszelak@utk.edu.

Crop Report

This week I traveled all the way over to the southwestern corner of Tennessee to the Harris Farm in Shelby Co. for a field day on organic production, agroforestry, plasticulture and marketing. Mr. Alvin Harris and his wife, Shirley, have been producing their crops organically for over 25 years on 24 acres. Their secret is cover cropping (hairy vetch and Crimson clover), crop rotation (3-5 year rotations), composting of city leaves, and plenty of diversity in the crops they grow. On the Harris Farm, you can find strawberries, blueberries, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, watermelons, lots of field peas (purple hull, red ripper, black crowders, zipper peas), squash, cucumbers, melons, okra, beets, onions, and sweet corn, as well as herbs (sage, dill, basil) and garlic and leeks. Their elephant garlic bulbs are ready for harvesting, and the onions and leeks, too. Their farm is Certified Naturally Grown, a farmer founded credible alternative to the USDA Organic Certification program (www.naturallygrown.org). I also visited the Jones Orchard in Shelby Co. Although the freeze in April destroyed their peach, plum, nectarine, blueberry and pear crops, they haven’t missed a beat. These folks have been providing fresh fruits to the Memphis area for over 5 decades, so when Mother Nature threw them a curve ball, they hit it out of the park with a new game plan to grow vegetables this season. They are growing canary-loupes, watermelons, sweet corn, okra, purple hull peas, green beans, tomatoes, yellow squash, and zucchini. In addition to these veggies, they have a whole line-up of value-added products, like jams, juices, sauerkraut, applesauce, salsas, and chow chow.

The last stop on my Shelby Co. visit was to the Agricenter International Farmer’s Market. Here you can find many locally grown crops. This week there were plenty of tomatoes, potatoes, cabbage, onions, yellow squash, and zucchini, as well as peas and beans.
Upcoming Events

TN Agricultural Enhancement Program– Producer Diversification Cost Share Program
Applications accepted: July 2 - August 31 (postmarked)
Additional details at www.state.tn.us/agriculture/enhancement/growth.html.

Southern Conservation Agricultural Systems Conference, June 25-27, 2007, Quincy, FL
For more information, visit: www.attra.org.

Tobacco, Beef and More, June 28, 2007, Highland Rim Research and Education Center, Springfield, TN
For details, visit http://agriculture.tennessee.edu/news/releases/0705-HRREC%20Field%20Day.htm.

Sunbelt Ag Expo Field Day, July 10, 2007, Moultrie, GA
For more information visit www.sunbeltexpo.com or call 229.985.1968.

Summer Celebration, July 12, 2007, West Tennessee Research and Education Center, Jackson, TN
For more information, visit: http://agriculture.tennessee.edu/news/FieldDays/.

National Association of County Agriculture Agents Annual Meeting/Professional Improvement Conference, July 15-19, 2007, Grand Rapids, MI
For details, visit www.naccao2007.msu.edu.

Building and Sustaining Effective Community Food Projects- A Training Facilitated by Southern SAWG, July 25-26, 2007, Nashville, TN
For more information, contact Keith Richards at keith@ssawg.org or 479-587-0888.

2007 Annual Small Farm Expo/Small farmer Recognition Program, August 2, 2007, TSU Research and Demonstration Farm, Ashland City, TN
For more information and registration, contact Hilda Gooch at 615.963.5530 or agooch@tnstate.edu.

Steak and Potatoes Field Day, August 7, 2007, Plateau Research and Education Center, Crossville, TN

Potato Association of America 91st Annual Meeting, August 12-16, 2007, Idaho Falls, ID
For details visit www.conferences.uidaho.edu/PAA.

NC State University Asparagus Twilight Meeting, August 16, 2007, Roxboro, NC
Learn about growing and marketing asparagus, including site and soil considerations, fertility requirements, insect, disease, weed control, harvesting, marketing, and cost of growing. For more information, contact Carl Cantaluppi at carl.cantaluppi@ncsu.edu or call 919.603.1350.

Sunbelt Ag Expo- 30th Anniversary Show, October 16-18, 2007, Moultrie, GA
For more information visit www.sunbeltexpo.com or call 229.985.1968.

International Irrigation Show, December 9-11, 2007, San Diego, CA
For details, call 703.536.7080 or visit http://www.irrigation.org.

Tennessee Fruit and Vegetable Association Convention, December 9-11, 2007, Nashville Airport Marriott, Nashville, TN

Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.