

Workshop Title: Fresh Culinary Herb Production for the Organic Farm

Speaker & their title: Chris Blanchard, Flying Rutabaga Works

Executive Summary:

Chris provided an overview of the management and marketing of fresh culinary herbs based on his experience on his own farm. He described propagation techniques, growing and harvesting processes.

Chris makes the distinction between growing herbs for the garden and growing for the farm. He points out that in the case of herbs, how they look is very important. Growing for the very best taste or highest content of essential oils or flavour is often not the best use of energy or time. Well-managed, well-grown herbs will deliver a very good product for commercial sales. He emphasizes that consistency in the size and quality of the plants is critical.

Selection characteristics:

- stocky plants with abundant growth
- hardiness
- Chris believes the secret in making money with herbs is putting them in attractive plastic packaging and selling them for a high price. Herbs can provide a high profit margin.

Propagating

- Don't transplant cilantro and dill. These plants do very well with direct seeding.
- Plant every week or even more frequently in the fall. The goal is to have new material constantly coming on.
- Propagating is not an easy process. Vegetative propagation is what we are looking for.
- Take cuttings when the plant has nice new growth but not necessarily too lush. The very beginning of spring seems to be the best time.
- Cut four inch pieces and strip off the bottom leaves about 1/2 of the length of the stem.
- Stripping the leaves provides wound sites where rooting will occur.
- Place plants in evenly spaced consistent rows using pure vermiculite as the rooting medium. Always work very quickly to avoid damaging the plants.
- Trays were placed in tents as required and heating mats were used to ensure good rooting.
- Fogg-it nozzles used to mist the plants gently 6 times per day; professional propagation chambers mist constantly. Adequate moisture is critical to success.
- Once they root out the plants are transplanted just like other vegetables into 2-inch pots.
- Rhizomes from the mint plants are used to propagate. Other plants with rhizomes can be treated in a similar fashion. Rhizomes are cut up with roots on them and then planted directly into the pots.
- Spring-loaded scissors are recommended tools as they are easy on the hands.

Rosemary

- Maintain 80 F temperature if possible.
- Use an eight-inch cutting and you can cut that in half. Both pieces will root out.

Growing

- Herbs were a high margin and high value crop on Chris' farm.
- He never planted for high yield; he planted for ease of weeding, harvest and management.

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- Perennial plants require getting rid of the weeds before any planting. Weeds must be controlled.
- Mulching helped with survivability over the winter, however mulch must be removed in the spring to avoid slug problems.
- In year one, simple perennials - sages, thyme and mint - were planted out on August 01 in 2 inch plants. This would be done every year. In year 2 these plants will flower later than other plantings (year 3 and 4). One can harvest in Year 3 and certainly in year 4 - the most productive year. Year 4 crop is tilled in. Then we move into a regular vegetable rotation. Till with the gate up will distribute roots on the top of the soil. Plant the simple perennials every year on the rotation described above.

Spacing - 30 inches from row to row

Complex Herbs:

- Tarragon - very hard to grow. Doesn't like wet feet. Grows into the ground and gets quite large.
- Rosemary - year one, two inch plants; then move consecutively into larger pots from year to year as plant grows. In Seattle with its relatively mild climate, rosemary grows into a tree.

Harvesting

- Always harvest when plants are dry. This is best done in the afternoon. As soon as plants are picked make sure you cool them. Plants will last twice as long if stored at 0C then at 10C; four times as long as at 20C. Basil is the exception to the cold rule.
- Tools: knives and scissors
- Harvest into shallow trays so that they can get cool as quickly as possible. Place in cooler. Cut into 8-inch sizes. Chris uses what he refers to as the "harvest wave" in the field. He starts at one end of the bed and works along the bed from week to week.
- Parsley and mint can be cut right down to the ground. Other plants need only 1/3 cut. Humidity for the herbs is important. You want to cool the herbs before packaging.
- As the basil approaches flowering you then have to cut it down for the plant to survive. If it goes to flower you have to let it go. Then cut it down so it can revegetate.

Marketing

- Use different colours for different herbs on the labels