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CSA farmers learn the hard way

Wet spring, early frost, squash bugs, weed pressure eat into inaugural harvest

By KEN LEVY For the Capital Press



Jenn Harrington, who partners with Doreen Guenther as contract farmers for the Hidden Springs Community Farm CSA, harvests New Red Fire lettuce at the CSA in August 2008.

Unruly weather, squash bug infestations and puncture vine proved to be thorns in the sides of the Sisters of the Soil during the 2008 growing season.

Doreen Guenther and Jenn Harrington - who aren't really sisters - are contract farmers for the Hidden Springs Community Farm northwest of Boise, Idaho. The three-acre CSA (community-supported agriculture) farm is certified organic, following strict limits on using chemical remedies for pests and other problems in crops.

Problems sprouted early in the season for the farm, with an unusually wet spring and rampaging weeds hampering their best efforts.

"It was too wet to work the fields as early as we wanted to," said Harrington. "Our soil ended up clumping because there wasn't enough organic matter in there. So we had to rework the beds after it dried out, with a little hand tiller. That took a huge amount of time."

That time loss and weather quirks, including unseasonable cold, meant corn had to go in almost a month late - too late for a successful harvest. Many of their crops also faced stiff competition from weeds.

The partners could see the weeds in the beds they'd already planted "getting bigger and bigger," Harrington said. "We couldn't do anything about it because we had to get stuff in the ground. You pretended the weeds weren't there."

Once everything was in, the farmers attacked the weeds with a vengeance, hand-picking and hoeing to remove them.

"One field was just completely infested with goatheads," Harrington said. "Our melons really had a hard time, since they were planted in the goathead field. They got huge weed competition early in the season. We were so busy, we couldn't get back to them. They stayed in weeds a long time, and that stunted their growth."

And then came the squash bugs. Harrington said she and Guenther hand-picked the bugs from the plants.

"We went out with a little container and a stick or the tip of a screwdriver and scraped them and their eggs off. If the adults or babies were attached to the plants, we just squished them."

Harrington said they had to go out every week, because the critters hatch every seven to 14 days.

"It's a job big enough for an army of volunteers. We thought about e-mailing the membership and saying, 'If you want squash or pumpkins, come pick the bugs,'" she said.

The partners didn't have to work alone. Several work-share members gave their time removing the bugs, and "we had the best work-share crew you could imagine," Guenther said.

"It's amazing we didn't lose more plants than we did," she said. "We had an adequate amount to give out every week."

Guenther cited other "little miracles" that kept the farming experience positive at Hidden Springs.

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"We had enough broccoli to give out for four weeks," she said. "Then the aphids came. We had lettuces until early August, and the chard and kale performed well."

Still, "it's been much more challenging than we thought it would be," Harrington said. "You come in with the confidence that, yeah, we can do this and do a great job. But Mother Nature had other ideas."

Mother Nature's other ideas included a chilly rainfall in late September, when the two were hoping for hotter weather.

"We never got that long period of hot weather early on in the season," Harrington said, "and a lot of our crops like tomatoes were really slow. We had tons of green tomatoes, but we were lucky to get enough (ripe ones) for our 100 families."

Guenther said one of the biggest things she learned this year is that heat-loving vegetables, like tomatoes and eggplants, rely more on warm soil, rather than warm air temperature.

"Our eggplants grew huge and lush and had lots of flowers, but no fruit," said Harrington. "The flowers would just fall off the plant because the soil temperatures weren't hot enough to support them. We had 300 eggplants in, but we didn't get enough to hand out to our 100 members. We should have had hundreds."

The farm sits in a microclimate around Dry Creek, where frost can come early and unexpectedly.

"We had a light frost on Sept. 2, a month and a half before the average first frost date," Harrington said.

Their planting of ground cherries was destroyed, and other plants took a beating as well. The icing on this difficult growing year came when hard frost hit the tiny farm on Oct. 8, well before regional average dates for frost and three days before the earliest snowfall ever recorded in Idaho history.

"This was a freeze," said Guenther. "It penetrated into some crops and damaged our winter squash."

"We pulled winter squash and pumpkins as snow was coming down," said Harrington.

Guenther said the sisters "picked like mad" and salvaged what they could of peppers, tomatoes and beans.

"We regretted not picking what was left of the green beans," Guenther said, and many were lost. The field "smelled like cooked beans, and they got translucent. It was disappointing."

While spaghetti squash mostly made it through the early freeze, butternut squash didn't fare as well.

"We had to tell people to use it right away because, with frost damage, it won't store as long," said Guenther.

"The weather has been strange," Harrington said. "I'm sure next year we'll overcompensate and plant too much because we're using this year as a guide."

Harrington and Guenther plan to do much more mulching.

"We'll do a pre-emptive strike," said Harrington. "We can mulch the beds we plant seedlings in right away, and the weeds won't have a chance to spring up and take over before we can get back to them."

Guenther said the sisters will plant flowers such as nasturtiums, petunias and others among the squash and zucchini plants to ease the squash bug infestations.

"Marigolds are pretty well-known for having naturally occurring pyrethrums sometimes used in commercial insecticides. We'll plant the tall ones. We'll also use a bit of homemade soap spray," she said.

The sisters are adding another three-acre plot to the farm in 2009, and "we'll move all the cucurbits (melons, cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, other vining crops) into the farthest field," Harrington said.

"I have a mental list of things we can implement next year," said Guenther. "It'll be so nice to apply everything we've learned, and everything will be that much easier. We'll be better farmers."

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