

PLANT EXCHANGE

If Only the Growing Season Lasted Longer

An Interview With
Dale And Rena
Hebda

BY **BRENDA K JOHNSON**
P&D Correspondent

Share your tips, give us a tour of your plant site, or send your questions related to outdoor or indoor plants to news@yankton.net Attn: Brenda Johnson or write to P&D, 319 Walnut St, Yankton, SD 57078, Attn: Brenda Johnson.

Q: How did you harvest in-ground spinach this March in South Dakota?

A: Extending both ends of the growing season without a huge heating bill is the challenge Rena and Dale Hebda tackled on their Mission Hill vegetable and fruit farm. They own Hebda Family Produce.

“On March 18th we harvested our first crop of spinach,” Dale said, “and we anticipate another cutting a week later. As the weather warms, it speeds the cycle.” Hebdas used passive solar energy for heat and light to grow this crop.

“At the March Vermillion Farmers Market, we sold 9 pounds of spinach in less than an hour. We hope the public will begin to anticipate our early fresh greens,” Rena said. And that’s not all. “Late this fall, we plan to offer fresh greens such as spinach, lettuce, kale, and collards.” One way they added growing months, earlier in spring and later in fall, is their hoop house.

HOOP HOUSE TRIALS

The 30’x50’ metal-framed structure covered in plastic, resembles a greenhouse with entrances on either end and with enough interior space to accommodate a tractor or other equipment. Unlike a greenhouse, crops

are planted directly in the ground.

“This high tunnel has year-round potential in South Dakota,” Rena said. “It’s not externally heated, but uses passive solar energy.” Because hoop houses were a new idea for South Dakota, Hebdas needed to see how it worked in their growing zone and on their site.

“Our first crop (in the hoop house) was last fall,” Dale said. “We chose varieties to find out what would grow and how long into maturity we could get them with our fall and winter weather. In September we planted lettuce, radishes, spinach, beets, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, and cucumber. We found out that the tomatoes, cucumber, and peppers needed earlier planting time, such as July.”

They kept track of temperatures in the hoop house through the fall and winter. “What we found,” Dale said, “was that if we had sunny days, and the air temperature dropped no lower than 22 degrees in the tunnel, we could grow lettuce, spinach and beets. So if you have cloudy days forecasted, you could decide if you needed to add (external) heat.”

“We found that spinach, beets, and radishes can be grown in our hoop house without extra heat,” Rena said. “For added insulation, we used a low tunnel cover (over produce) inside the hoop house.”

“We carried the spinach (planted in September) into winter with the tunnel inside the tunnel without extra heat,” Dale said. That’s how they had their early spinach harvest ready in mid March.

“We’d be planting (this year by late March) in the tunnel if the ground wasn’t wet,” Dale said.

“We found we need to raise the ground level of the movable hoop house soil about 6 or 8 inches,” Rena said. This will help

drainage for growing in the early and late seasons.

**HOME GARDEN
SEASON EXTENDERS**

“Gardeners can extend their seasons (Spring and Fall) with row covers,” Rena said. “When planting outside, you can make a low tunnel with row cover fabric over the top of some structure to hold the fabric off the growing plants.”

“Corn crib air tunnels work,” Dale said, “or something bent to make a hoop. With row covers we plan to have fresh tomatoes and cucumbers in late June.”

“We use plastic gallon milk jugs with bottoms cut off for plant protection in the spring. Rena leaves the caps off the jugs because “too much moisture accumulates inside the jug and encourages plant diseases.”

“We tried hot caps on each plant,” Dale said. “You put soil around each waxy paper dome frame to hold them down. They work except on windy days. They fly like kites. We picked them up a mile away.”

One way of extending the season is to store produce for longest shelf life at home. Hebda produce is fresh and local. “Potatoes, squash, carrots, and onions do well to keep them at a constant cool temperature like a root cellar,” Dale said. Adequate moisture for refrigerated items is another extender. “I stand asparagus in a ¼ cup of water in the refrigerator to keep it fresh,” Rena said.

A FAMILY BUSINESS

“Here we don’t have to belong to a health club,” Dale joked. Hebdas posed a real life problem for their children. “We have three young children ages 6-10 at home. They have the challenge to build and manage a cucumber tunnel. They have to decide where to put it so that it is out of the wind, near the wash station



PHOTO COURTESY OF DALE HEBDA

Dale and Rena Hebda have trial grown an array of produce in their season-extending hoop house. The building is large enough to accommodate a tractor for the crops planted in soil within the structure. Sunlight and passive solar heat in the plastic hoop house are adequate to grow some crops commercially, but external watering is required.

and other factors.” Their work is rewarded when they weigh their harvest.

Rena agreed, “We like to find ways for the kids to be actively involved and rewarded in age-appropriate ways. Sometimes they have decided to donate some of their produce to The Banquet or to a food table at church. They notice to see if their produce is taken; that someone needed the food.”

“Being involved (in our family business) teaches responsibility, money management, interaction with people, and they learn about fruits and vegetables and how to grow them. Our 17-year-old Becca set up and managed a vendor site in Vermillion in March. She was comfortable in Vermillion, having taken classes

there. It was a new vendor location, but we knew she could handle it. Our son Steve, who is now in Denver for automotive training, has been there six months and is being given more responsibility, a reward for “work ethic.”

**MARKETING PRODUCE IN
EXTENDED SEASONS**

“We’re in our sixth year as a family business and we work hard to develop a local customer base that wants our produce,” Rena said. “We plan to offer produce at the farm all season until mid December this year. We appreciate loyal customers who think of us, as our produce is available longer in the season. We will be at the local Yankton Farmer’s Market and have a weekly fresh vegetable delivery

program in Yankton. We also sell produce at the Vermillion Farmers Market on Thursday evenings and in Sioux Falls at Falls Park on Saturdays.”

“Our licensed commercial kitchen allows us to add value and offer jams, jellies, pies, salsa, pickled cucumbers and beets, asparagus and spaghetti sauce, along with produce and apples. Of course we’d like to open new markets with local schools and other institutions and restaurants.”

“Fresh produce is personal for us,” Rena concluded. “In our family we know fresh produce tastes better. Our children are evidence of that as they eat more variety of vegetables and fruits.”

What Are The Best Gardening Methods

An Interview With
The Wyman Mc-
Cain Family

BY **BRENDA K. JOHNSON**
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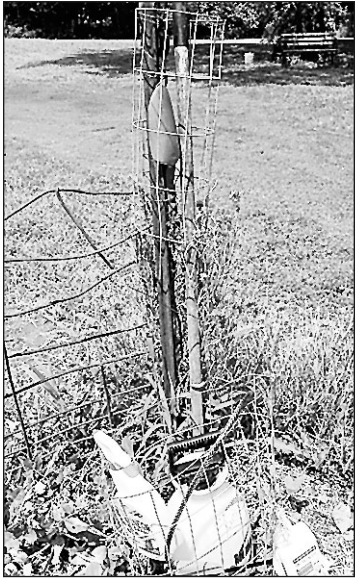
Q: What are vegetable gardening methods you have learned?

A: Wyman McCain and his daughter Shelley Sukup and his college granddaughter Charlie Sukup and other family members operate a large produce garden in rural Crofton Nebraska.

Wyman grows a variety of sweet and hot peppers. “I buy transplants rather than growing them from seed.” He fashions pepper cages from sheep fencing to support the peppers and keep stems from breaking the wind. “I trim the base leaves of the pepper plant. I have found that pesky beetles don’t like sunlight.” He eliminates the shade of the lowest leaves also, which sometimes touch the ground and become conduit for disease.

Mites are common in a summer garden. Wyman checks plants that are susceptible to mites. As a preventative or first sign of them, he sprays plants with a dish detergent solution as an “insecticidal soap.”

Cucumbers are susceptible to wilt from the cucumber beetle. “I trellis the vines for air movement between the vines, to get them off the ground for pests, and for easy picking.”

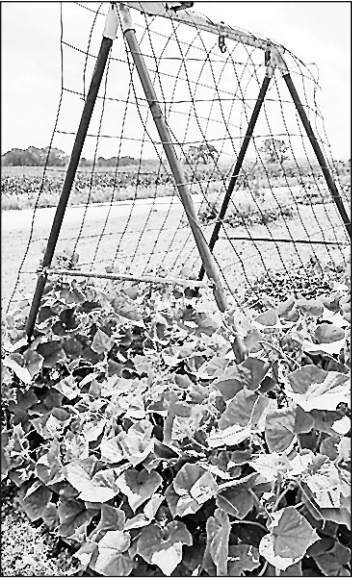


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Concrete reinforcing wire, also made for plant cages, corrals hand implements and containers for natural treatments and lights in a handy spot for workers at the end of the row.

One way they deter weeds in squash and pumpkins is to add a black plastic runner down either side of the plant and parallel to the rows. “Vines grow onto the plastic and fruit is protected from laying on the ground. It’s easy to keep them in place as they grow so the vines aren’t damaged when you move them. I’ve also tried cedar wood chips. Cedar has an oil that may deter weed seeds and insect movement.”

Charlie Sukup attends Northeast Community College in Norfolk and is an active gardener.



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This two-sided trellis is ready for cucumbers to climb. According to McCain, the cucumber beetle is less likely to cause wilt with the vines off the ground.

“Tomatoes need heat stress to produce better,” Charlie said. From mid May to early June is their usual planting time for tomatoes. However, last June 10th, a tornado touched down on their garden, and their focus was temporarily diverted to straightening corn and clean up of shelterbelt trees. But they continued gardening.

“With each tomato plant, we put a teaspoon of Epsom salts, which adds magnesium,” Charlie said. “For cutworms, we put a tube of newspaper to protect the stem. We cut off the lower plant stems that may touch the

ground, and clip diseased leaves. We water in the morning, being careful not to splash onto the plant, which prevents disease. We like the soaker hose to reduce splash. Because tomatoes need heat stress to produce, we don’t put mulch around the plants.”

Wyman lays black plastic or landscape fabric around tomatoes to attract heat to the soil and prevent weeds, instead of the soybean stubble in most of the garden. Cages keep tomato plants off the ground.

Shelly Sukup works in Yankton and is also an active gardener and food preserver. “Health Kick is our favorite tomato for salsa,” Shelley says. “Rutgers heirloom has the flavor. Brandywine flowers quickly, but you need to keep them picked. Celebrity is the hybrid that is so uniform and tough-skinned for marketing. We like Lemon Boy and Golden Girl for their low acid. Last year we tried Pineapple heirloom tomatoes.”

Wyman commented on the continuing rain last August that increased fungal blight problems in their garden. “We harvested tomatoes quick and fast last year,” Wyman said. “Health Kick tomatoes, though a favorite, were quite affected by blight.” He noticed that volunteer tomato plants in different parts of the garden were not as affected as those in the tomato section. He wondered if second generation plants in the same soil are possibly better adapted and perhaps more resistant to blight.

DIBBLES AND BITS:

- More on hoop houses or high tunnels: Hoop house can be different dimensions, but is often mobile so that it can be moved with a tractor or removed in sections for transport. Because you plant directly in the soil within the hoop house, mobility allows the hoop house to move for crop rotation. If a cover for a different crop is needed for a new season, such as tomatoes in the fall, the hoop house may be moved. Ventilation can be as simple as open entrance doors on the ends of the structure. External heat may be added, but increases production costs. See MotherEarthNews.com, “Low Cost, Versatile Hoop Houses” for more information or your local extension service.
- Perennial plants are thrifty: Plants you grow for color, shape, and texture that live several years, save money. While perennials may cost more than annuals at original purchase, a peony, chosen for zone hardiness and planted in a favorable location, can return each spring for fifty years. Other benefits of perennials include: year-round roots prevent erosion of soil. Roots retain water and fertilizer, which diminishes run-off pollution. In the April 2011 National Geographic, Robert Kunzigh writes about corn breeders who could develop perennial corn within this decade.
- Vegetable garden saves money: Gardeners surveyed nationally in 2011 by Garden Writers Association think so. About half the gardener respondents plan to put a 10 ft square garden in their back yard this season. More than savings, they are motivated by quality, taste, and nutrition of their homegrown vegetables. More than half get their gardening ideas from other gardeners—another reason to read and share in Plant Exchange.

PLANTS AROUND US



BRENDA K. JOHNSON

Daisy and Keith Halverson of Yankton have woods with drifts of Damesrockets on their acreage west of town.

Damesrockets made the prairie feel like home. Its dime-size fragrant bluish-purple flowers cluster near the top with lance-like leaves below, on a stem over two feet tall. Damesrockets can be found at abandoned farm home sites and open woods predominately in the Central and Northern Great Plains. Not native plants, these escaped ornamentals were among the first flowers widely planted by early pioneers of the region. As with other members of the Mustard family, the

short-lived perennials produced lots of seed, and the plants often re-seeded themselves.

Today’s Damesrocket progeny are a reminder of their place in history. Damesrocket seeds are sometimes planted in roadside flower mixtures for spring display. Ground-foraging birds eat its seed. Its roots are shallow. The plant is non-poisonous, and “is rarely present in large enough number to be a problem” according to the source Weeds of the Great Plains.

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