

A Farmer's Perspective  
By Ed Cuneo  
Spinella Farm

As everyone knows, spring is a time for renewed vigor and hope on the farm. However, what they don't realize is the tremendous amount of work that is involved. Farming vegetables is akin to preparing for an athletic event. Spring is the training part. Summer and fall are the events themselves.

New varieties of vegetables, in our case, old heirloom varieties, are being tested in small plots and will be available to customers in the restaurant business, road side stands and at farmer's tailgates markets that we participate in. Fertilizers, lime, sprays and other materials are being purchased or applied. New methods of planting and cultivating are tried and judged for success. One thing is for sure - spring is the season in which the farmer will be putting out a lot of money and can only hope at this point that he can make it back. It's easy to get discouraged because of the initial capital outlay.

If you are in this business solely to make money, forget it. Go do something else. You have to love what you are doing to be a farmer. The image of a farm as an idyllic oasis is pure bunk. Farming is work. If you love it, the work is not as much drudgery. For example, I love to pull weeds! As weird as that sounds I've grown to love the activity because it allows me to think clearer and when I'm finished there are few things in this world that are more satisfying than a row or bed that is weeded cleanly.

Besides the usual optimism that I exhibit because it is a new year, there is extra incentive this year. The push for local vegetables, for whatever reason, continues to build momentum. I can't wait to sell to my customers, to see the joy of them enjoying the buying and using of some vegetable that grew not too far from where they live. Nothing beats fresh and getting it right from the farm or the farmer at the market is about as good as it gets.

Time flies working on a farm. Someone once said that necessity is the mother of invention. That person must have been or knew a farmer. We have to be mechanics, planters, marketers and laborers, sometimes all in one day. I challenge anyone to show me another job that combines all of that. It makes for a fast day and a good night's sleep. To farm, you have to be patient and let things roll off of your back. There are many things that the farmer cannot control. The trick is to recognize them and do right the things you can control. Planting the right varieties, watering, fertilizing and cultivating and paying attention to detail are things the farmer can control and should control. Knowing your markets and what the options are if one doesn't work out are also things the good farmer should work on. A poorly run farm is not due to the weather or the markets - it's because the farmer didn't take care of the things that he could control.

What timeline do we follow on our farm? We spend the late fall and winter months evaluating the past season. Then we spend the months from February to April planting, either in the ground or in the greenhouse. In the meantime, around March we talk strategy for marketing, what markets we are going to and the customers we are going to encounter. This year we will be trying a new market in Margate on a Thursday morning. The decision to go to Margate was made when we wanted a day between our Tuesday market in West Cape May and our Saturday market in Moorestown so that we

can continually harvest without having to store anything. We do not have a walk-in box so everything we deliver is harvested within 24 hours, sometimes less than that.

Another consideration we make at this time is the pricing of the vegetables. This year will undoubtedly bring a price increase. Diesel fuel is almost \$4 a gallon at this writing, fertilizer this year went up 300 percent and seeds increase with the cost of shipping as do other materials. So we have to raise our cost – but not as much as a bigger farm. That's one of the advantages of farming on a small market farm such as ours. We also do our own labor.

Spinella Farm will be 100 years old in two years. That's a great accomplishment and a sense of legacy. I learned a lot from my grandfather, Sam Spinella. But there are things he didn't do that I've learned from other farmers. That's the secret to a good life – never think you know everything. I found that out when Grandpop died in 1990 and we had to run the farm by ourselves. We had grown up on the farm yet we were in a new position and, boy, did we learn how much we didn't know.

As the year goes on, I will be presenting some of my thoughts on farming and the world of vegetables. If you would like to share your thoughts with me, please feel free to contact me at [farmeredcuneo@yahoo.com](mailto:farmeredcuneo@yahoo.com).