



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

New seedlings are slowly replacing the hundreds that were damaged by frost when the furnace failed to operate in the greenhouse at Buckle Farm in Unity.

Buckle

Continued from Page C1

at the mercy of the weather. Last summer Buckle and Hamilton were among those who helped Misty Brook Farm in Albion recover after a destructive microburst ripped through its fields.

Normally, the farmers check the greenhouse around midnight to make sure that everything is OK. But the day before the disaster, they had been pulling rocks from their front field and were so tired they slept through their usual greenhouse check.

"I was in shock," Buckle said of the sight of the frost-bitten seedlings.

The farm is known around Boston for its bountiful selection of tomatoes, usually growing 30 types of mixed heirloom and other varieties. It was hard for the farmers to see all 3,500 tomato

seedlings, about 700 pepper plugs and about 300 eggplant plants need to be removed from the greenhouse.

"We filled the back of the truck and brought it over to the compost," Hamilton said. "It's like a tomato graveyard."

Seth Kroeck, the owner-manager of Crystal Spring Farm in Brunswick, said that he definitely understands their plight.

"When you hear about something like this that has happened to anybody, it hits you in the gut," he said. "We've been farming here in Maine for the last 14 years, and we've had plenty of problems like that. We even had a similar situation five or six years ago with an apprentice who did not set the heater correctly on our greenhouse. We ended up losing all our tomatoes. And we had a lot of people who stepped up to give us plants so we could carry on."

Kroeck said that he is planning to give Buckle and

Hamilton some eggplant seedlings.

"The farm community in Maine is small and relatively tight-knit. We all know each other, and we're happy to lend a hand," he said.

Meanwhile, Buckle and Hamilton are still on the hunt for hot pepper seedlings to replace the ones they lost, but thanks to the help of other farmers and growers, they have a good feeling about this season. It might not be business as usual, exactly, but they are pretty sure it will work out fine.

"We know we'll get through it," Hamilton said.

But at least one thing has changed permanently because of the greenhouse furnace debacle: they check the thermostat all the time to see if any more unwelcome visitors have gotten inside.

"I didn't like spiders before," Buckle said. "Now I definitely hate them."

Dandelion

Continued from Page C1

Some people use bacon, she said, but either way she will brown the lard — or bacon — and then add a bit of water before adding the dandelion greens, some onions, salt and pepper.

"It's like heaven, that first meal of dandelions," she said. "I wait all year for it."

She's not the only one waiting.

For Maine's pollinators — including honeybees — the dandelion flowers are among the first sources of natural food.

"Honeybees need the dandelions to build up their stores and broods in the spring," according to Richard McLaughlin, master beekeeper and president of the Maine State Beekeepers Association. "We really encourage people to leave them alone and not see them as a weed but something that is really only around for a short time and then they can have their green lawns."

According to MOFGA, dandelions are actually good for lawns, as the flowers' roots loosen and aerate hard-packed soil. The plants are good for people, too, with MOFGA calling it "a green



JULIA BAYLY | BDN

Among the first flowers to bloom in the spring, dandelions are important food sources for Maine's pollinators, including honey bees.

and growing first aid kit."

According to the website, dandelions have been used for everything from removing toxins from the bloodstream to improving digestive function. Dandelions are also high in vitamins A and C and contain iron, calcium and potassium, making them among the more nutritious

wild Maine edibles.

Not bad for a common weed.

NOTE: Marilyn Ouellette is the sister-in-law of BDN reporter Julia Bayly, who has relied on her in the past for information on traditional St. John Valley foods and foraging for edibles.



TROY R. BENNETT | BDN

Laura Mailander (left) and Nyaruot Nguany (right) of Cultivating Community advise resident Jimmy Makowiecki as he plants peas in his rooftop garden plot at 409 Cumberland Ave. in Portland.

Urban

Continued from Page C1

For rooftop gardens, where full sun can beat down all summer long, an irrigation system helps.

"The soil gets really dried out. It's important to have a cover on the soil. We mulch with a thick layer of hay, which retains the moisture and absorbs the heat," said Mailander. "If you don't have an irrigation system, you'll have to water and mulch often."

To get the soil up five stories, Avesta used a crane. But Mailander recommends independent homeowners use what's handy. "Com-

post, leaves, manure ... garden in place," is her motto.

"My philosophy is if you have bare soil, you have dead soil," said Mailander, who has a Mainer's toolbox of DIY solutions at the ready.

"I try to use as many free things as possible. Seaweed is great because it's adding all the nutrients you need to the soil. Add it on top throughout the season," said Mailander. She suggests rockweed, which is "a free form of fertilizer, it's really sustainable. We are so lucky to live in Maine where we have so many resources."

And speaking of resources, green roofs do more than nourish humans and please city pollinators (which have found their way up here).

"Rooftop gardens absorb the heat that would otherwise be absorbed by a black rooftop," said Mailander. "Urban gardens, trees and green space all help to cool off cities in the hot months. They also absorb water during heavy storms, minimizing the runoff into Casco Bay."

Looking down upon the dozens of empty flat roofs visible from 409 Cumberland, one wonders why more gardens are not flourishing high above Maine's food-forward city. Kerwin, who comes up with a basket and cane to harvest spinach and salad, has a solution.

"Get rid of all the pay garages and cars and we'll have a lot more room for gardening."

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