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# News from the Orchard

April 14, 2010

## Hoch Orchard and Gardens

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This newsletter is for everyone! Please print it and share it with your friends, neighbors, relatives, and customers

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### What is new for 2010?

We are having another spring with crazy unpredictable weather. We had the first March on record without snowfall. March was pretty dry with way above average temperatures. It is a little cooler today but still above average. The average high and low for today (4-7) is 34 and 45; it is already around 40 at 7:00 this morning. Needless to say the development of the fruit trees is way ahead of schedule.

The apricots are starting to bloom and the plums will start shortly after the apricots finish. The apples are a few weeks away from bloom but it looks like they are going to be exceptionally early too. Now we have to hope that the weather stays warm and the arctic winds stay away. A hard frost now could kill the apricot flowers and damage the plums. That would mean no apricots and a small plum crop. If the apples bloom at the end of April and we get a hard May frost we could loose all the tree fruit!



Apricot trees in bloom on 4/10/10

We had a mild winter here so the fruit trees had it easy. The previous winter was the coldest we had seen in over ten years. That winter ended our Minnesota peach experiment, killed the apricot flower buds and damaged our more tender plum trees. This year we are excited to see our new apricot orchard with a full healthy bloom. Our new plum orchard is looking good with most of the young trees full of flower buds. The old plum orchard looks good too. Our young cherry trees have a healthy set of flower buds which means we could have our first wholesale crop of cherries for the food coops.

The berry patches are looking pretty good. We expanded our raspberry beds three years ago, but last year the canes were weak after a long cold winter. We are expecting our biggest crop ever this summer. Our strawberry production should also be up this year. We expanded our strawberry beds last year and should have more than double last year's crop.

Our apple crop should be bigger this year. Our Honeycrisp trees are in a somewhat biennial rut with this being the on year. Our Haralson are also biennial and will be in the down year for us. But the exciting news is our new planting of SweeTango had a nice set of flower buds so we should have our first crop this year.

Overall this could be the biggest fruit crop we have ever had at Hoch Orchard and Gardens, but we have to use the same concept as the poultry farms and try not to count our chickens before they are hatched! A few frosty nights in the next five weeks could result in a very small harvest. Summer winds could take off the fruit or hail could cut it to pieces. A bad drought could cause the apple to fall or high temperatures and blazing sun could burn the fruit. A spike in insect levels or extended spring rainy periods could increase fungal pressure and damage the fruit on the tree. We are long way from harvest and Mother Nature can still throw a lot at us. Right now the bud set looks great and plants are healthy!

### Our first High Tunnel

A high tunnel is an expanded version of the small hoop houses you often see the vegetable growers put over the garden crops to bring on an early harvest. We put up a high tunnel last fall for growing berries. The tunnel is 28 feet wide and 200 feet long. The hoops are made of metal and it is covered with greenhouse poly. The poly is held down with ropes laced across the top like a big boot. The poly can be pushed up on the sides for venting. There are no fans or heaters in the tunnel. The sun heats it and the open sides do the venting so there is no energy or fossil fuels used to run it. Farmers and researchers have had some fantastic results growing raspberries and strawberries in tunnels. The plastic makes a higher temperature environment and keeps the wind

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low. Water is applied with drip irrigation which keeps the plants dry and minimizes fungal problems. The monsoon type summer rains that have damaged our berry crops the past three years can't hurt the berries in a tunnel.

Conventional fruit growers have been getting unbelievable yields and quality in tunnels. There is not as much information out there on organic production in tunnels and the results have been more variable than that of conventional growers. The potential looks very good to us, so we will be experimenting with tunnels for a while.



Our new tunnel

We started planting in the tunnel this week. Eventually it will be filled with berry plants but it will take a while for the raspberry canes to fill their space so we are planting some veggies between the berry plants.

This year the USDA is offering grants in order to increase the production of local fresh fruit and vegetables. Jackie has applied for one of these grants, if we are awarded the grant we plan to put up a second tunnel and plant it with blackberries and dwarf cherries.

## Spring Construction

We have a lot of equipment on our fruit farm. There is never enough space to keep everything out of the weather. Last year we starting talking with our friend Roald Gundersen about building equipment shed. Roald designs and builds houses, greenhouses, meeting rooms, and sheds with whole tree framing. An intact round log has much more strength than the same size dimension lumber. So small trees can be harvested and used in framing. Last summer we sketched out a small 10 x 40 equipment shed that will be open on one of the long sides for tractor access. The living roof will be covered with soil and seeded.

Roald made a list of columns, beams, and rafters needed for the project. He gave me minimum dimensions for these logs and went into our woodland and selected trees for the purpose. Roald gave my crew a few lessons on how to strip the bark off the standing trees last summer then they went at it. In a couple days a crew of three had stripped the bark off

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of enough trees to build my shed. Now the trees are dried out and ready to be cut down.

Later this month we will cut the trees (which are light since they have been drying for the past eight months) and drag them to the building site. Roald and his crew will be coming to the farm and getting us started on the construction. We plan to get part of the building put up at the end of the month. Then on May 15<sup>th</sup> we will host a full day workshop sponsored by the Driftless Folk School. Attendees will learn about the whole tree construction concept and design, see the construction techniques, and actually help assemble part of the building. This will be quite an event complete with a locally grown lunch made at the orchard.

You can get more information about the workshop at [www.driftlessfolkschool.org](http://www.driftlessfolkschool.org) or [www.wholetrees.com](http://www.wholetrees.com). This will be a great opportunity for our faming friends to learn how to build some farm sheds with low grade trees grown on your own woodlot.

## Soccer Challenge

Hoch Orchard and Gardens has boldly challenged the management and staff of the Pearl Street Brewery [www.pearlstreetbrewery.com](http://www.pearlstreetbrewery.com) to friendly game of soccer. While this LaCrosse Micro Brewery has hundreds of staff and volunteers to recruit from, Hoch Orchards has only family and few interns to choose from. The Pearl Street staff has a number of highly conditioned athletic human specimens to field a team. Unfortunately we did not bring in any Brazilians this year, but we do have wirey bunch interns that could put up a good fight!



The crew so far- Abel, Jackie, Patricia and Pookie

This battle of soccer titans is scheduled for May 8<sup>th</sup> at the orchard. We will let you know who comes out victorious.

## Save the date Sat August 21<sup>st</sup>.

We will have a big on farm celebration with tours for the completion of our farm transition. Thanks to our many supporters!

Thanks, Harry

