

# Hensel Farms named Vegetable Growers of the Year

The Vegetable Growers Association of New Jersey honored Hensel Farms in Milmay as Vegetable Grower of the Year on Feb. 6, at the New Jersey State Agricultural Convention in Atlantic City. Four generations of Hensels have been involved in farming in Atlantic County over the last 100 years.

Robert and Clara Hensel and their family arrived at Ellis Island from Germany and in 1908 purchased 34 acres in Milmay. They began raising produce that was shipped by train to Philadelphia. By 1965, grandson Eric M. and his wife expanded the operation

party audits, which allowed them to grow baby spinach and lettuce for the bagged lettuce market. They have installed nearly 4 miles of deer fencing to prevent wildlife damage. And in 2010, they installed a complete stainless steel packing line to meet food safety requirements.

For years, Hensel Farms has been recognized as leaders in the growing, packing and transplanting of Romaine and leaf lettuce. They were first in using a ski-type high speed plug transplanter and developing methods of growing lettuce transplants for fall pro-



Standing left to right are Eric Hensel Jr., Eric Hensel, Mike Yacovelli and Joseph Marino, President of the Vegetable Growers Association of New Jersey.

Photo courtesy of NJ Dept. of Agriculture

to the current 250 acres and sold their crops through Landisville Fruit Growers Co-Op and Vineland Produce Auction.

Now, the farm encompasses several farms throughout the area, growing lettuce, cabbage, cucumbers, parsley, eggplant, spinach, peppers, tomatoes, flowers and bedding plants.

Hensel Farms LLC is currently operated by Eric M., Eric R. and Eric Hensel Junior and grandson Michael Yacovelli.

Hensel Farms has long been out in front on food safety, actively encouraging local coops and brokers to cool produce to prolong shelf life. They were among the very first South Jersey farmers to have third

duction successfully. In 2013, they are planning to convert all lettuce to be grown with drip irrigation.

More than 1 million pounds of sweet jalapenos are grown annually for to supply peppers for the salsa used in fast food restaurants.

They have seven greenhouses where they grow transplants of lettuce, tomatoes, peppers and cabbage. After that, the greenhouses are used to produce 10,000 flats and baskets of annual bedding plants each year.

Both Erics have served on the board of the Landisville Produce Association, with Eric R. currently serving as treasurer. He also has served on the Board of Directors of the South Jersey Produce Association.

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# FFA, 4-H speakers at New Jersey statewide agriculture gathering

New Jersey State FFA President Ernest Ariens of Brick Township addressed delegates gathered for the New Jersey State Agricultural Convention in Atlantic City on Feb. 6. The sophomore at Ocean County College, who is studying to become an educator, spoke about how New Jersey Agricultural Education and FFA make it possible for the younger generation to begin their journey to a lifelong career in agriculture. He noted with the global population expected to increase by 2.3 billion by 2050, the world's farmers will have to grow about 70 percent more food than what is produced currently — how are we going to produce enough food to feed the world?

"This question influenced my decision to enroll in an agricultural education program," said Ariens. "We must find a way to keep America the world's farm and I want to do my part."

Ariens said Agricultural Education and FFA prepare students for life and teaches leadership, advocacy and how to be the best you can be. He said it has made him an advocate for agriculture.

"We must do our part for the benefit of mankind and all in this room to secure the future of agriculture," he told the delegates. "It is because of you that we have gotten this far; let's take it to another level as we work together to create new agricultural education programs, prepare more agriculture teachers and impact more students as we help them reach new heights."

Kristie VonThun, 17, of Monmouth Junction was the 4-H speaker. VonThun told the convention delegates that her involvement in 4-H helped to guide her toward a career in agriculture. She will be attending Delaware Valley College in the fall, planning to major in Equine Science. VonThun has been a 4-H member for more than 10 years in both Middlesex and Mercer Counties. She raises and shows dairy goats, dogs and horses. She has received many honors over the years; she currently is the New Jersey 4-H Equestrian of the Year and will represent New Jersey as a delegate to the National 4-H conference this fall. Her parents operate VonThun Farms, specializing in small fruits, vegetables and greenhouse production.

New Jersey has 35 FFA chapters with 2,538 students this year.



Kristie VonThun recounts how 4-H guided her to a career in Agriculture.

Photo courtesy of New Jersey Department of Agriculture



VonThun Farms, Monmouth Junction, was honored at the New Jersey State Agricultural Convention Wednesday, Feb. 6, with the Neil Robson Farmers Against Hunger Award. The award was established in memory of Robson, a leading Burlington County farmer who died suddenly in 2006, to recognize farmers who make outstanding contributions to the fight against hunger by providing fresh fruits and vegetables to help feed the hungry. Bob and Cindy VonThun have donated more than 30,000 pounds of produce to Farmers Against Hunger, a gleaning organization that collects donated Jersey Fresh produce and distributes it to emergency feeding organizations throughout the state. Photo, Left to right: Bob VonThun, Kristie VonThun, Cindy VonThun and Kristina Guttadora, Farmers Against Hunger Program Director.

Photo courtesy of New Jersey Department of Agriculture

# “The Perishable Pundit” asks farmers to think locally and globally

by Pat Malin

SYRACUSE, NY — To see the big picture in produce, look locally. That’s the advice Jim Prevor, keynote speaker at the Empire State Producers Expo, gave to his audience on Jan. 23 at the Onondaga County Convention Center (OnCenter.)

Known as “The Perishable Pundit,” Prevor’s address came on the second of the three-day conference previously known as the Fruit & Vegetable Expo, sponsored by the New York State Vegetable Growers Association

helping beginner farmers, high tunnels, grafting, bees, cover crops, berries, root crops, vine crops, corn, labor and immigration, food processing, direct marketing and food safety.

Prevor’s power point presentation concerned how small vendors can compete for customer dollars against Walmart. His “hot” marketing tip is: “local is the new organic.”

However, “local” can have vastly different definitions and consequences for the consumers. Price, brand names,

retailers, and in turn, those retailers should cut the farmers some slack, Prevor added, when it comes to supply, weather and food safety.

He presented statistics showing that Walmart’s growth slowed in 2012 and sales declined (as it did in other supermarket chains, too). Other discounters are making inroads against Walmart, too. He asked the audience to consider how important produce is to Walmart now that the management is focused on improving or maintaining profits in a bad economy.

“Tell Walmart we don’t want your service, we don’t want your brands,” said Prevor. “Tell Walmart, we want freedom to buy from any vendor.”

Could a retailer focus solely on buying from “local” vendors, those within the same state or within a radius of several hundred miles? For some retailers in England, he pointed out, it might be more economical or logistically easier to buy produce from France. But suppose the customers prefer food from Scotland, a far-off neighbor and member of the United Kingdom? Will they pay for the price difference? “It [nationalism] is a political problem,” admitted Prevor.

With the recent attention paid to “local,” some supermarkets are becoming “hyper-local,” Prevor said, relying on such gimmicks as building rooftop gardens, offering food from local CSAs and promising 24/7 harvesting.

On the other hand, retailers and restaurants should not push local produce at all costs. “It doesn’t add to total food consumption of in-state products,” Prevor said, referring to a statistical study. Could your restaurant, for example, afford to serve only New York State wines exclusively and ignore customer requests for popular wines from Napa Valley, Spain or Australia?

Perhaps “local” farmers can expand their range? Do apples grown in New York State appeal only to New Yorkers or will Floridians choose them over apples from China? “If transportation becomes cheaper, it will trump the decision to buy local,” Prevor insisted.

Local retailers might save a few pennies and compete against Walmart by consolidating procurements while also reducing staff and related expenses. He suggested this

might work for chains as Wegman’s and the Belgian company Delhaize and its American subsidiary, Hannaford.

Laura McDermott, a member of Cornell Cooperative Extension’s Horticulture Team in Eastern New York (Hudson Falls), said Prevor’s advice should be well taken by farmers.

“He offers insight into industry,” she said following his talk. “Our growers are so

busy sometimes that there’s a disconnect between them and industry, but he wants them to know they have a huge impact.”

His lecture also reminds them that there are some things “beyond their control,” she added. “Our important market is retail, not wholesale, so we need to know how Walmart controls the food chain. We didn’t know how it shifts.”

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## Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention sees success with new features in 2013

by Bill Rose

The Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention was held Jan. 29-31 at the Hershey Lodge and Convention Center in Hershey, PA. Over 2,000 persons attended the convention, according to Bill Troxell, Executive Secretary of the Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers’ Association. He said that the vegetable registrations were similar to last year. Troxell notes that the various grower associations sponsoring the Convention are constantly looking to improve the experience for attendees. One new feature this year in terms of programming was a special session on invasive species, such as Spotted wing Drosophila and brown marmorated stink bug. Also, Troxell notes that for the past several years the convention planners have been upgrading the marketing part of the program. This year there were marketing sessions in the morning and afternoon of all three days of the convention.

The convention featured about 160 companies exhibit-

ing in over 200 booths. Two companies rented space outside to show equipment. Educational sessions at the convention featured such topics as Tree Fruit, Ag Education on the Farm, Soil Health, Nutrient Management, Organic Vegetables, Wholesale Marketing, Value Added Products, Growing and Storage for Winter Markets, Food Safety and various specific fruit and vegetable crops. There was also an afternoon-long session on “The Art of Giving Great Service,” presented by Zing Train of Ann Arbor Michigan. The trade show featured equipment, plant, seed and packaging distributors, as well as the tasting of farm market products such as pies, pastries and cherry juice.

One vendor summed up the convention in just a few words: “We like everything about this convention! There are excellent, top quality sessions. The administrative staff for the trade show is just fantastic. We’ve been coming since the 1970s.”

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There were plenty of opportunities to connect with past customers and make new connections at this year’s Expo.

(nysvga.org). The show combines the major fruit, flower, vegetable and direct marketing associations of New York State with a comprehensive trade show and educational conference for growers from New York, surrounding states and eastern Canada.

The vendors who participated in the trade show included plant and seed dealers/nurseries; farm and tool equipment manufacturers/distributors; chemical and fertilizer companies, and farming organizations. Despite the name change, the lectures at both the OnCenter and a satellite site at the Doubletree Hotel in East Syracuse, still focused on important issues vital to farmers and producers.

The theme of the Becker Forum on Jan. 21 at the Doubletree was “Managing Human Resources in Agriculture: Creative Steps When Public Policy Fails.” Kathy Means, Produce Marketing Association vice-president, concluded the conference with a discussion on legislative affairs.

The other lectures at the OnCenter concerned a wide variety of topics, including

weather, choice, locale and even politics can be more important than buying local, Prevor explained. Transportation costs and the supply chain also affect consumers and vendors.

Prevor, a food magazine publisher and editor, started the international prepared foods conference and exposition, and is a consultant to the perishable food industry.

“Can (buying) local be an effective tool in the battle against Walmart?” Prevor asked his audience. Obviously, he said, “Walmart is no slouch” when it comes to marketing. It has the advantage of “lots of PR, lots of stores” and a strong consolidated supply chain.

He said vendors and retailers “need to differentiate by adding local...(whatever is) difficult for Walmart to duplicate.” Vendors can compete with Walmart on “local” food, providing the best quality at the lowest price while ensuring a steady supply.

“Vendors should be expected to be farmers, not importers,” he continued. Farmers need to build a good rapport with local



Larry and Adam Voll of Soergel Orchards discuss the different products of Atlantic Power Solutions with sales representative, Bill Warner. Atlantic Power Solutions specializes in pumps and generators.

# New Garden burnishes its brand by putting relationships first

by Karl H. Kazaks

GREENSBORO, NC — There's no doubt landscaping and nursery businesses everywhere were severely affected by the recent housing downturn. But not everyone responded in the same way.

At New Garden Landscaping and Nursery, the prominent source in North Carolina's Piedmont Triad for horticultural services, garden and landscape plants, and outdoor living products, the owners and executive team decided to revisit and reform their approach to customer relationships.

"We have always had a strong customer service aspect," said Jim Keen, a landscape architect and one of New Garden's team of half a dozen designers, reflecting New Garden's position in the upper end of the market. "But we decided to become more relationship-oriented and less transactional."

That meant doing away with the distinctions between salespeople and designers — instead, there would be only customer relationship managers.

"When I first started I didn't sell maintenance," said Keen. Now, when Keen (or another designer) meets with a client, he is empowered not only to discuss details of a landscap-

ing project but also to sell the company's other services — maintenance and, in the past year, turf care.

"We're all salespeople now," Keen said.

More than just that, though, customers now have access to a different kind of human resource at New Garden — an individual who knows all facets of the company and can tailor a solution to the customer's particular circumstances. That might mean planning and installing an \$80,000 patio or making a We Plan, You Plant appointment for a customer.

New Garden's We Plan, You Plant is a weekend service in which one of the company's designers works with a customer to create a plan for a small landscaping project — like an island bed — which the customer intends to install him- or herself. The customer arrives to the appointment with relevant information like dimensions then the designer works with the individual over the course of about an hour to draft a plan. It is then up to the customer to buy the plants and other products needed and realize the plan.

This service is offered at New Garden's project store, the store at New Garden Village. Its second retail outlet — New Garden Gazebo, on Greensboro's Lawndale Drive

— has more of an upscale boutique feel, with all kinds of gifts, including dinnerware. At Christmastime, the company has an open house at its Lawndale store which is so popular local police officers are used to direct traffic going in and out of the store.

One of the consequences of the company's refined approach to customer service is a burnishing and clarification of the New Garden brand — superior quality and service in the horticultural and landscape realm. Its customers don't pay the lowest rates in the market, but they can be sure they've chosen a landscaping and nursery company devoted to providing exceptional products and services.

That means consistency in the quality of the plant and landscape products in its stores — as well as consistency in service. When a New Garden customer signs up for a maintenance contract, they learn that the same foreman will be there for all maintenance visits. Keen tells customers, "You're going to see the same person on your property — he'll know every divot in your yard."

What's more, New Garden is committed to enriching its customers' experience is by having regular weekend workshops and events, which they promote through social media outlets. "There's lots of activity here on the weekends," Keen said.

Keeping up with current trends and products ("Rain barrels sell like crazy," Keen said) is another way New Garden stays fresh for its customers.

For example, New Garden promotes Energy Saving Landscapes (ESLs) and has sent staff to become ESL certified. "What made us successful thirty years ago may not work today," Keen said. "We'll adapt our ways to stay in the forefront," all the while maintaining the

## Today's Marketing Objectives

By: Melissa Piper Nelson  
Farm News Service

News and views on agricultural marketing techniques.



## Talk to Me

### Communications seal the deal with new hires

by Melissa Piper Nelson

The new batch of seasonal interns, apprentices and recent hires soon will be walking through your farm gate. They are eager to learn and ready to work. The question is, are they prepared?

You may have hired the very best candidates, but if you have not fully communicated your company's vision, mission and critical expectation points, the experience could be disappointing for both parties.

Communications which seal the deal are those that occur even before the new worker arrives at the business. During the interview process, some information about the company and your operating philosophy changes hands. A prepared candidate also will have done their homework and researched your business to learn what you do, how you do it, and what makes it unique.

The period between accepting a candidate and having them begin the job, however, is a prime time for you as a business owner or manager to further prepare the new hire and outline your expectations for their work. Unfortunately, many managers wait until the employee actually arrives and uses the first day on the job as the information day.

That first day for the new hire can be overwhelming from many aspects. Don't expect a new employee to retain your business rationale on the same day you are explaining their specific job duties and showing them around the farm.

More businesses are preparing new hires by talking with them between their job acceptance and arrival. If you have a designated human resources or training person, they will likely advise the employee on the many facets of the intended work plan. This also is the time for you to address your expectations from the core mission perspective. You have hired the best employee and now it is time to outline to them what makes your business tick — what is your vision for the company right now and in the future. What are your great expectations that will help them succeed in the job and succeed with the business?

Even with tight schedules, all types of businesses should be able to prepare information packets, online modules or short informational films that help prepare new employees for their work. Don't rely, however, solely on what is on your web site or social media pages. Information specific to a new employee should be more specific than the introductory messages posted for customers.

Effective communications should be ongoing as well. You and your field or plant managers, farmers' market coordinators and team leaders need to be continually assessing and determining what information is important and when it should be delivered for clarity and reception by all new workers. Not being kept informed is at the top of the list for employee frustration.

Throughout the organizational structure (even if it is a family business) each manager or supervisor should understand how clearly to communicate ideas to their employees and how to receive and understand feedback. On the job training is essential to farm businesses, but on the spot information usually leads to poor performance and little knowledge retention. If a "right now" message is required, communications training on the part of the manager will offer the tools to know if the workers fully comprehend and can perform with the instructions given.

Helping employees understand how and when to ask questions may seem like an elemental function. Don't take for granted that employees will understand this concept. If a manager does not want to be interrupted while demonstrating a new technique, make sure both manager and employee know that there will be time for questions at a designated time. And if a worker needs to receive feedback about a task



New Garden offers a weekend service We Plan, You Plant in which its designers make plans for small projects which customers plan on installing themselves. Jim Keen, landscape architect, takes a turn at the We Plan, You Plant table from time to time.

Photos by Karl H. Kazaks