

GROWING ORGANIC MESCLUN AND SALAD MIXES IN ST. ALEXIS, QUÉBEC

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Who we are:

The Ferme Bionicale means Biologique **Nicolas Alexis Emilie**, who are our three children and who have all taken an active part in this project.

What we do:

We are specialised in 100% certified organic production such as large size hard necked garlic (4, 5 tm), French Charentais Melons (10,000 melons), 3 exquisite types of mesclun (4000 one-half pound zip-lock sacks per week and 45 other vegetables. Our Mesclun mixes include (1) the baby lettuce mix with 15-20 varieties of red and green lettuce such as Batavia,, oak leaves, Petites beurres, Mini-Romaine, leaf , bib, Boston and lollo rossa cultivars in each bag. (2) the lettuce beet greens and chard mix with the same lettuces, 4 types and colors of beet and 3 colors of chard; (3) the Midori mix(midori means green in Japanese) which contains the same lettuces as well as tat soi, mizuna, joi choi and Mei quing choi. In our Greens production we also have, Arugula, cress, Rapini.

How we grow.

We grow about 4, 5 acres of vegetables and fruits on 3 acres of land, which means we double and triple crop- which is also a type of rotation. Early lettuce (tp 1 April) – beets-carrots would be an example of a triple rotation, garlic and lettuce would be a double and melons and garlic would be a double over-winter rotation.

Who are the lucky ones!!

Presently we sell at farmers markets in Val David, Les Dimanches Bio d'Outremont and at a Montréal grocery store ECollegeY in NDG, basically because Jeff and Deva care about quality. We grow from March to October and sell from May to mid November.

Now the nuts and bolts of our greens.

We have specialized in bagged mesclun since 1990. Now we offer Bébé Mesclun(only lettuces), Lettuce with beet leaves, which has evolved to half lettuce and half baby swill chard and bulls blood and some Chioggia(leaves are less susceptible to Cercospora leaf spotting), Midori which is half lettuce and half Asian greens(basically mizuna, purple and green baby choi, Gai lin choi(green stems), golden frills, red spicy thin-leafed mustard and tat soi and Italian Radicchio(We went to Chioggia, Italy to get the seeds!). Other items are arugula, baby and larger if we have enough of it!, and this year we have done spicy mix(only the Asian leaves), and in early spring, a mix of half lettuces and half spinach.

That is the easy part. Now to explain how we grow. Firstly, we only grow specialty French lettuces from which we get from a European seeds producer. In their catalogue we have 64 cv of lettuce, organic and pelleted!! They also sell us small plastic jars of 1000/jar pelleted seeds, so we can get a lot of different leaf sizes, shapes and colors and most important of all taste and long bag life. We select our cultivars on how long they

stay nice in the bag. We can keep our bags in our fridge for 3 weeks and they are still good. If a cultivar gets brown on the cut stem, we don't keep it.

Seeding. We seed all of our lettuces and Swiss chard in 128 cells with organic soilless mix. This year we started seeding 4 beet seeds per cell, so a beet is harvested for leaves and after 5 harvests we let it go to become a beet, its real place in life). Every two weeks we seed 50 to 102 trays per seeding with one or maybe 3 trays per cultivar, which means we seed 30 or more cultivars each time. We water the first day 5 to 15 times, meaning every time I come to the greenhouse, I water. We want to solubilise the pellet to get the seed going. In the spring the heating is on, always under the bench. In the summer we seed and as soon as 90% of the cotyledons are up, they go outside. We have a tree under which all of the seedling tray so, so even in rain, we don't lose them. After 5-6 weeks in the plug trays we transplant them on raised beds 5-7 rows wide, so on the bed we have 128 transplants of cultivar 1, followed by 128 transplants of cv 2. Yes we get very often 100% germination and transplantable lettuces. That is why we pay so much for seed. We irrigate on transplanting either with micro mists or a hose with a peigne (flattened spray head). A few times a year we still weed lettuce, especially if I haven't been able to get the raised beds clean enough in midsummer with the rains and high weed pressure. We harvest at 8 am, always the first thing. We go down each row and, for example, take 6 of each cultivar. We are 3-4 harvesters and cut 6 small lettuces about 1 inch above soil line (**DON'T CUT THE GROWING TIP**) then go to the next cultivar, which means that in each bin we have the 15 or more different varieties already mixed. We return to the washing area, under the tree, and then go the 3 washing basins, then into the spinner (plastic drum washing machine). **Thanks to Emilie**, we spin longer, so the leaves are dryer, and the mix keeps longer. Yes guys, girls are almost always right; you just have to let them know more often!! Everything is done with surgical gloves from harvest to the end. The best person does the bagging, so the leaves are bent to get in and not broken. I am the last one on the list, so I can never bag.

For the beet lettuce mix, which is a Swiss chard, bull's blood and half lettuce mix, we harvest the beet mix and add it to the first washing tub, then in the second and are mixed with the already washed lettuce in the 3rd. We wash the lettuce in 1, 2 and 3, then wash the beet mix in 1 and 2 and mix them together in three. We also do the same for the midori (a Japanese word for green). The midori mix is prepared the same way as the beet mix. Arugula is done next, and is harder, then the cress and then the rapini. We will harvest on the same bed 2 to 3 weeks and do from 250 to 400 bags per week (225 gram (1/2 pound) 9 x 12 in a zip lock). We harvest Monday for the Monday and Tuesday deliveries and Thursday or Friday for the Saturday markets, so our bags are never more than three days in the fridge. When we come back from the CSA on Tuesday pm, we put all the unchosen produce in the fridge and it goes to the **Manne**, a Joliette food center for poorer families. We only are open on the farm for sales on Friday pm and Saturday, we never keep anything in the fridge more than 4 days. As Emilie is now taking over the farm, I'll let her answer the questions!