



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Farms Preparing Plants for the Upcoming Gardening Season

Date: February 20, 2009

Location: Pezza Greenhouse & Garden Center, 2279 Plainfield Pike, Johnston

Background

Even though there are remnants of snow in many places and the ground remains frozen, greenhouses at farms throughout Rhode Island are sporting new seedlings that will grow into mature plants during the upcoming growing season. At Pezza Farm in Johnston, the greenhouse is full of strawberry, lettuce, herb and flower seedlings that will be sold to customers this spring and summer for planting in their gardens or in containers. Farm owners Michael and Doreen Pezza also sell their plants at several farmers' markets throughout the state.

As more and more Rhode Islanders try to find ways to save money on food and other products, this year is expected to be a banner year for home vegetable gardens. Many of the plants starting as seedlings here at Pezza Farm and other greenhouses will end up in home garden plots and containers, and provide Rhode Islanders a fresh source for vegetables and fruits throughout the summer and into the fall. Pezza Farm is also raising flower seedlings that will grow into plants ready to be planted in May. The farm's store sells an abundance of flowers and shrubs to consumers. Pezza Farm is a DEM- certified nursery, a designation that means the farm has been inspected and sells products that are free from injurious insects and plant diseases.

Doreen Pezza is an active participant in the 2009 Rhode Island Flower Show, which is taking place through this weekend at the RI Convention Center, and is offering demonstrations on flower and vegetable container gardening.

In addition to being a source for nursery products, Pezza Farm offers visitors an opportunity to see and feed their pens of small farm animals including goats, chickens, pigs, and rabbits. The farm also raises cows and this spring will join the RI Beef Cooperative, which sells beef to local customers.

Agriculture in Rhode Island

The agriculture industry in Rhode Island – 858 farms, mostly family run, occupying 61,000 acres -- generate more than \$100 million annually -- is not only an integral part of the state's economy but provides a valuable contribution to Rhode Island's open space and quality of life. DEM is responsible for a broad range of programs aimed at curbing the disappearance of agricultural land and supporting the economic viability of farming in RI. In the past 20 years, with state bond funds and federal funds, and in concert with partners including municipalities, land trusts, and non-profit agencies, the state has preserved 84 farms in Rhode Island, totaling 6,229 acres.

All Rhode Islanders can help preserve the states' farms by purchasing locally grown products from local farmers' markets and roadside stands. The Department's Division of Agriculture promotes and markets 36 farmers' markets and approximately 47 roadside stands throughout the state, as well as a number of other farm viability projects and programs like Rhody Fresh Milk and local meats, etc.

Local products are also better for the environment. Cargo ships, airplanes and trucks burn lots of fossil fuels to transport goods. Buying locally reduces the amount of air pollution from transportation. Packaging is often needed to protect produce from damage, contamination and tampering during transportation and storage. Buying locally eliminates or reduces the energy and resources needed to manufacture and dispose of packaging.

Interviewees:

Matt Greene, Supervisor, Insect, Pest and Plant Disease Control in DEM's Division of Agriculture, discussed the importance of buying plants from a DEM-certified nursery in order to ensure the plant is free of plant diseases and insects, and how these plants will be among the first products offered at farmers' markets when they open in April. A list of certified nurseries and nursery stock dealers is available on the DEM website under Topics, then Agriculture from the home page. Matt will talk briefly about this weekend's RI Spring Flower and Garden Show, of which DEM is a participant.

Craig Pezza, an owner of Pezza Farm, will provide an overview of how the farm grows its seedlings and talk about container gardening using lettuce seedlings.