



A monthly column to get to know your MFVGA Board Directors

Changes Come From Many Resources

As a member of the Minnesota Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (MFVGA) and the Minnesota Apple Growers Association (MAGA), I would like to introduce myself and share a little wisdom or experience from my 40 plus years of growing strawberries, blueberries, apples, tart cherries and a few vegetables. Our farm is in Grand Rapids, MN, a friendly and beautiful community with weather that can sometimes be challenging and unpredictable. (I'll bet that sounds a lot like your farm area.) We started with strawberries, added blueberries in 1985, apples in 2000 and tart cherries in 2005. In 2000 with the addition of apples we put in deer fencing around our 20 acre farm. Support for the deer fencing came from the MN DNR in the form of planning, labor and financial support. It was probably the best investment we ever made for our farm. It kept the deer and bears out and allowed me to sleep much more restfully at night. My wife, Carol, was especially happy that I could sleep more peacefully without tossing and turning.

Throughout our farming existence, Lavalier's Berry Patch and Orchard, I have been a teacher in the Elk River School District. I used to think I went into teaching to have the summers off, but since we started our farm, summers are just a seasonal change of hats.

We have had many successes and many lessons learned in our 40 years of farming. One thing that has helped me keep track of my mistakes (I mean lessons) is keeping a daily and seasonal diary. Our farm is in Grand Rapids but our home is in New Hope, 170 miles away. On the many trips back and forth throughout the season I keep track of the phenology along the route. I also write in the diary the changes I see with the plants at our farm throughout the season. Those notes are a way to document the changes from one year to the next and prepare me for the progression of the present season. The diary also gives records such as: planting and harvesting dates, pest management schedules, equipment used along with materials and conditions at the time of spraying. If I ever have something that works out really well during the season or a lesson learned that I need to remember, I put two stars by the note. As a retired teacher now, I have time to look at that diary during the winter months and those stars really draw my attention.

We are continually learning to use sustainable practices on our farm to try to preserve the integrity of the soil and the quality of the produce we grow. At one time we used to fallow a field before planting the following year. Today we try to keep our fields

covered at all times, either with our marketable crops or with cover crops. Our choice of cover crop depends on the time of year we are planting, but whatever the cover crop used, we try to incorporate a flowering choice that can provide food for our bees and other pollinators throughout the growing season.

We are not an organic farm but we have learned new ways to reduce our use of pesticides. Monitoring insect populations through trapping, the use of exclusion netting, and the acknowledgement that a little insect damage does not automatically require mitigation have all played a role in changing our pesticide use.

There is a time at the end of each year when I ask myself, "What did we do right this year, or what can we improve on?" I think it's important to give yourself credit for small changes that made the year go well, but at the same time recognize that there are always new things to try.

I recognize that changes come from many resources: from listening to other growers, reading new research and attending conferences like the MFVGA and the combined MAGA. We are so fortunate to have an opportunity to network with so many knowledgeable people at a time when we are starting to plan a new year of farming. I hope you took the time to make this year's conference a part of your growing season – and if you didn't, be sure to watch for details on the 2023 conference. We would love to see you!

Sincerely,

Stuart Lavalier and family