

GROWING FOR MARKET article submission
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"Spice it Up! Grow Ginger!!"

As the awareness of financial and environmental costs of transportation increase, farmers are pushing "local" to extremes. Good. Let local reign! We regularly challenge ourselves to trial the "that doesn't grow here" type crops on our farm. Hence, growing ginger in the Northeast.

We own and operate Old Friends Farm in Amherst, Massachusetts. We are Certified Organic and Certified Naturally Grown and grow cut flowers and salad greens on 8 acres. We sell wholesale to restaurants and florists, and retail at farmers markets in the Pioneer Valley and Boston area. In 2006, we added ginger to our product line. We received a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant to study the viability of growing ginger as a Northeast crop, and are proud to share our findings. (For more info on SARE, see below.) Ginger without all those fossil fuels- Go Local!

We decided to grow ginger as a way to take advantage of our under-utilized greenhouse space. Like many farmers in the Northeast, the summer rays make our greenhouse temps soar. We often exclaim, "Yikes! It's too hot in there!", close the door and leave it unused for months.

Why are we so afraid of the heat? Some farmers live, farm, and depend on those temperatures! With these little Hawaiian environments found all over the Northeast, it's time we Northerners expand our concept of what we can produce locally to include sub-tropical crops. It can potentially increase farm income, help cover costs of an under-utilized greenhouse, and certainly be an eye catcher at market.

Ginger is grown similarly to potatoes. We purchase our 'mother root' ginger directly from a small organic farm in Hawaii. We cut it into 3-4" pieces, making sure that each piece contains at least one 'eye' or node. In late March, we plant the ginger roots densely in a custom made soil mix in 'nursery crates'. These nursery crates are put into a germination chamber in our greenhouse and kept at 80 degrees Fahrenheit. At this point, we are adding heat, but by May, their only heat source is the sun.

In six weeks or less, the 'mother roots' have produce some pronounced nodes and some may even have a shoot or two emerging through the soil. In 2007, we transplanted half of the ginger into plastic bulb crates of soil mix in the greenhouse, and half directly into the soil in an unheated double layer hoop house. Both create environments that are suitable for ginger.

Ginger is a heavy drinker and feeder. Once shoots emerge, we soak it daily, simulating the tropical storms that dump rain daily on soil that dries out between storms. We fertilize every other week with fish and seaweed emulsion. Similar to potatoes, ginger does respond to hilling, as the rhizome (the ginger root) grows upward.

Our harvest began in August, although it peaked in late September. We started our harvest a bit prematurely to take advantage of our farmers market season. We lift the ginger, break off the roots and rootlets, then wash it to remove any soil. The 'mother root' usually breaks off during this process. Unlike a hollow potato mother tuber, the ginger 'mom' is firm and fibrous. It can still be used for teas or fine grating. The young ginger is creamy gold with pink hues, has no tough outer skin, and contains no tough

fibers. It slices easily and is just as tasty and spicy as the older ginger. The stalks can be used fresh or dried for tea or soup. On a home scale, it would be possible to harvest some of the ginger and leave the rest to continue growing. It can be overwintered as a tender perennial, and the dormancy will make the unharvested young ginger root develop a thick tan skin and be suitable as future mother roots.

We found incredible demand for the local ginger. Not only is this fine grade of young ginger difficult to find in the stores, the fact that it was local was an extra attraction. A big pile of young, local ginger is a beautiful sight! Local Organic ginger has a high profit potential. We sold the young ginger for \$15-20 per pound. Although this is considerably more expensive than Organic ginger in the stores, customers agreed that it was a higher grade, contained more useable ginger per root and was easier to use.

No need to be afraid of the heat anymore! Perhaps ginger is only one of many tropicals that could be a local commodity, such as turmeric, galangal, tea, figs, dates, olives, tropical fruits and nuts. There's a bounty of possibilities! Go to your private tropical estate on your farm, or inside your home on your sunniest windowsill, put on some cool sunglasses and turn Hawaiian dreams into reality! Have Fun!

SARE is a regional organization that offers grants to producers that want to try something innovative on their farm. It has to be something that will help other farmers also, not something just specific to one farm. SARE projects need to have solid outreach components. For more information on SARE, or to obtain a copy of the ginger project summary or other project summaries, visit www.uvm.edu/~nesare.