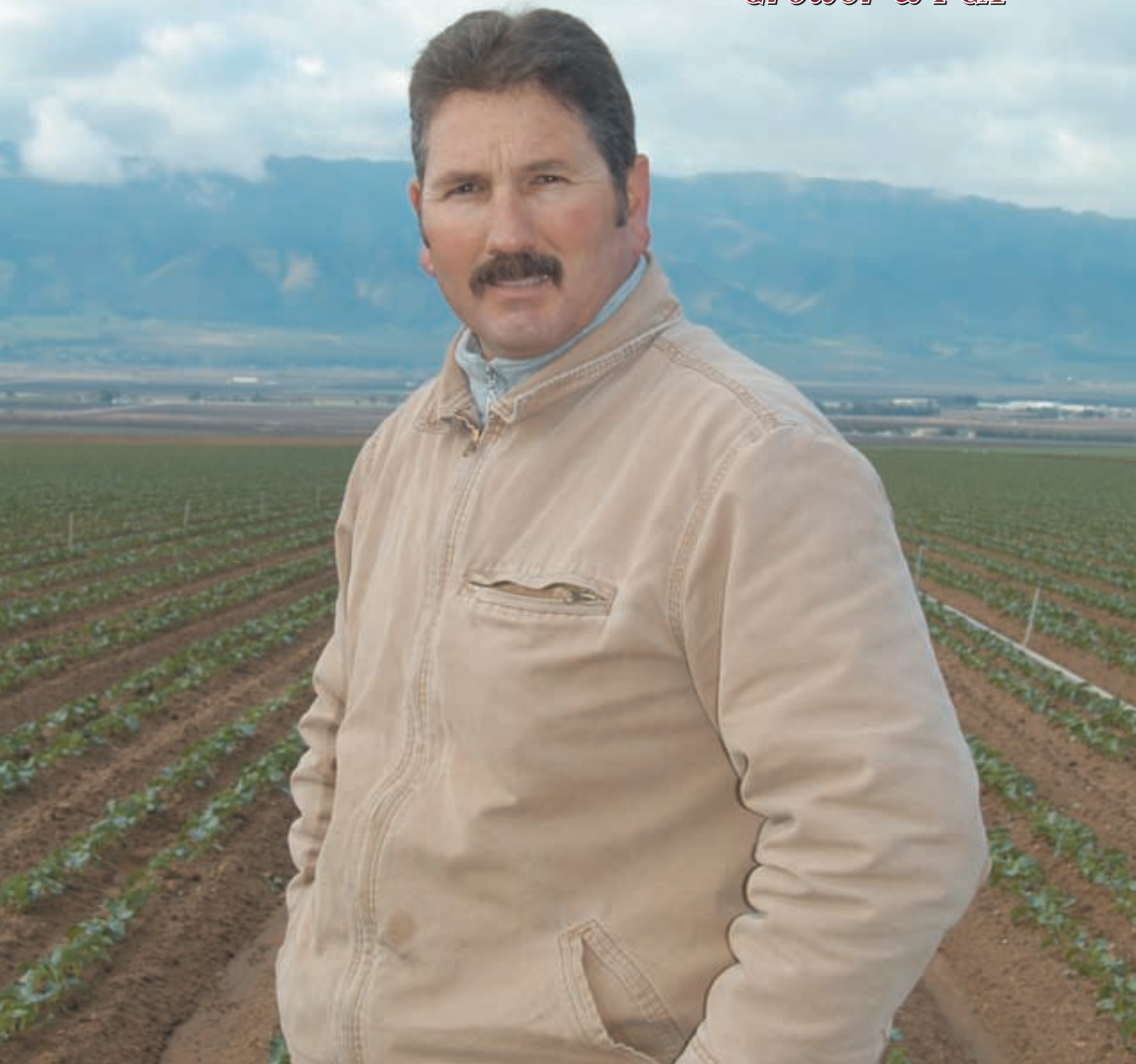


Vegetables

Vol 9 • No. 1 • January 2005

WEST

Grower & PCA



Whole Leaf Lettuce Program

Restaurant Trade Generates Demand

By Patrick Cavanaugh, Editor

Greg Lazzerini, farm manager with Boss Farms LLC, is a partner with Mills Family Farms, both of Salinas, Calif. Of the 3,500 acres he oversees, one crop that garners a lot of attention is leaf lettuce for Mills' whole-leaf lettuce program.

The whole-leaf product is used by the restaurant trade throughout the country as a garnish on plates or on appetizer trays or to decorate salad bars—and a variety of other uses.

Lazzerini oversees fields in both the Salinas Valley and in San Benito County. The crops include iceberg, leaf lettuce, spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, kale, parsley, green onions and other minor crops.

The biggest crop is leaf lettuce using romaine, green and red leaf varieties, where the leaves are separated from the stalk and then processed in-house before it's shipped out.

"We use certain proprietary varieties with attributes such as a special leaf texture and leaves that are a little thicker and that stack well—not over-curved," said Lazzerini. "That's what the trade is looking for."

To help encourage good leaf pro-



Greg Lazzerini said the whole-leaf program requires special varieties and growing practices. He is the farm manager of 3,500 acres in partnership with Mills Family Farms

duction, the crops are farmed a little differently. "We do different spacings, (which again are proprietary,) in order to get equal growth of the leaf with more room to grow," said Lazzerini. "We want uniformity and a good leaf count."

In the field, the heads are cut, trimmed and put in totes. The leaves are

separated, washed and packed at the processing facility.

"We remove the cover leaves and use every leaf down to the core. The smaller leaves at the core are used in a baby spring mix," noted Lazzerini. The leaves get smaller as you go into the stalk. Of course, there is more profit in the larger leaves because it doesn't take as many to make a full box.

"We have the patent in doing the whole-leaf process. By carefully snapping the leaf off the core in a certain way by hand you do not disturb the cells as you would if using a knife. The special snapping of the leave helps retain freshness and increases shelf life," Lazzerini said.

The crop is grown in the spring and summer in Salinas and then moved to Yuma in winter. In April, the daily harvest begins again in Salinas.

Mills Family Farms has been producing the whole-leaf product for about 10 years. Lazzerini became a partner with Mills in 1999 and at that time Boss Farms began. The name "Boss" refers to a popular Hansen Farms label that had been around for many years. Mills

(continued on page 3)

One of 18 filtration stations that serve the Boss Farms Land. All fields are started with sprinklers and then finished off with drip tape.



Whole Leaf Lettuce

(continued from page 2)

bought the label from Hansens when they got out of farming.

Mills also has a farming operation in the desert, known as Desert Boss. There they grow a lot of leaf lettuce for the whole-leaf product as well as other crops. "While Mills has outside growers supplying whole leaf product to them, Lazznerini is the only in-house grower.

Drip is king on Boss Farms ground. In fact, every field on the farm is on drip. Lazznerini is so dedicated to drip that he



Young broccoli plants growing in decomposed granite soil.



Lazznerini is a big proponent of drip tape, which will be laid down in this broccoli field soon.

was perhaps the first grower in the Salinas Valley where 100 percent of his farming operations were on drip. "I have at least 18 different filtration and pressurization stations to service all the farms. And we have gone as far to build and engineer our own tape laying and retrieval systems.

"I also have equipment that can lay out the tape at five mph, where normally it's being laid out at around one mph," Lazznerini said. "I've been working on it for many years and have it refined," he said. "When retrieving the tape, you have to go slow to prevent damage."

Lazznerini knows how to take care of his tape as he can do 12 crops using the same tape. "My product of choice is Aqua-Traxx made by Toro. I especially like their pressure compensating tape, (Aqua-Traxx PC) unique to Toro. In Salinas, I have some hills where I had a big problem with mildew and Toro's pressure compensating tape solved the problem. Before I had this special tape, I could only go with sprinklers and it brought on much more mildew pressure," said Lazznerini.

Tape longevity has to do with having good filtration stations. "You need a good system that does not pass small emitter-plugging particles," said Lazznerini. "We use sand-media filters, which have proven to do a great job."

(continued on page 4)



Biologically Active
Foliar and
Soil Products

30th Anniversary!

Certified Organic

Greg Gaffney
4218 W. Muscat • Fresno CA 93706
Fresno: 559-268-2835
Bakersfield : 661-321-9860
Fax: 559-268-7945
Cell: 559-240-5126
E-Mail: bioag@theworks.com

Whole Leaf Lettuce

(continued from page 3)

“While the initial investment is expensive, in the long run it’s definitely the way to go when measuring quality, uniformity and yield,” said Lazznerini. “When it all pencils out, you are saving money on drip.”

Drip allows a savings on fungicides because you do not have to use as much, noted Lazznerini. “You save on other materials including fertilizers, as well as the application of these materials.”

“For the lettuce, we use drip on the surface, three lines down an 80-inch bed. We sprinkle it up for germination and then switch over to drip at thinning time. This even-watering gives us great uniformity and quality. With drip tape we are lessening mildew pressure. It makes a big difference,” Lazznerini said.

Creeping into the fields like clockwork during the growing season is the red aphid. Lazznerini said it’s a pest he always has to deal with, but he runs Admire through the tape which controls the aphid.

“We have a plant nutrient program that we run through the drip as well. “We use Actagro’s humic acid material, which helps open the soils for good water penetration as well as helping to retain the nitrogen in the root zone—preventing it from leaching out—a big water quality issue in the area,” Lazznerini said. “Because we are retaining more nitrogen, we need less of it, which reduces farm costs.”

To give his crops top nutritional

Always working to farm smarter, Lazznerini uses good filtration systems to keep his drip tape operating efficiently.



Cowpeas are grown as a cover crop on soil with a lot of decomposed granite. The crop will later be disked in to increase organic matter.

priority he gives the plants a wide variety of macro and micro nutrients. “We give the crops exactly what they need at the time it needs it,” he said. Soil and tissue testing during the growing season help maintain awareness of the crop needs. “We try not to give it anymore than what it needs, particularly, during a time when the cost of production is going up,” he said.

In some growing blocks on the East side of the Salinas Valley, the soils are composed of more decomposed granite, which soaks the water in quickly. This is where the drip tape is very effective in metering the water at the rate which can be immediately used by the crop. Also, to help provide organic material on these soils, a cover crop of cowpeas are grown

and disked in each year.

Similar cultural practices are used for broccoli and cauliflower. “We use humic acid in all the fields and we turn to Di-Syston for aphid in these two crops.

He also produces a lot of iceberg lettuce, all on drip irrigation.

Lazznerini’s broccoli and cauliflower are grown mostly for the fresh market with a portion going to bulk. Mills Family Farms does all sales and distribution.

Currently in Salinas, broccoli is growing and doing well. “We do various packs for broccoli including florets,” he said. The Cauliflower is sold whole.

Across the fields, the biggest pest pressure is downy mildew, leaf miner and aphid.

Downy mildew pressure is lessened on the crops with drip. Leafminer on lettuce is treated with Success—one of the more effective materials out there, noted Lazznerini.

Red aphid presents more pressure on ice berg lettuce especially when the head starts to form. Since it is difficult to get control materials down in the head, he relies on Admire to get to the pest. “We have to protect all crops from aphids. If not, we end up having to leave damaged crop in the field,” said Lazznerini. “There are several problem aphids, however, red aphid does the worst damage. If you don’t treat for it, you will end up with it and once you have, there’s nothing you can do,” said Lazznerini.

