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Earthbound Farm's heirloom leaves product will also have a new label for spring with coupons for discounts.

Earthbound also recently switched to using 100% post-consumer recycled plastic for all of its clamshell packaging, earning the company the Produce Marketing Association's Impact Award for Sustainability and the Environment last year.

Ocean Mist Farms, Castroville, will continue shipping its newly redesigned packaging for 25 of its commodities. The packaging includes a nutritional benefit message and nutrient information.

Misionero Vegetables, Gonzales, is also shipping its new Garden Cuts salad kits, after an initial soft launch in December.

Church said. The commodity label with the new design will affect commodities, such as broccoli, and represent an update of the design.

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Earthbound Farm, San Juan Bautista, plans to make updates to current produce labels.

Samantha Cabaluna, director of communications, said some of the products that will get changes this spring include broccoletto, which will be labeled with a new recipe.

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lties market grows

As the weather gets warmer for zucchinis and other squashes, sweet red onions, and toward May, yellow peppers.

No major acreage or program adjustments are planned, Lane said, as the company continues to serve a mix of clients from retail to foodservice.

"Right now we're just going to be steady and maintain our programs," he said.

Ande Manos, saleswoman for Babé Farms, Santa Maria, said spring means the arrival of specialty items like colored baby carrots and unconventional radish varieties ordered by many foodservice customers.

"Their color really changes the produce section," Manos said.

Donnie Blanton, director of sales for Sunnyside Packing Co., Selma, said eggplant is among the company's big spring and summer commodities, along with cherry tomatoes, squashes and bell peppers.



Dawn Withers

Eric Brennan, USDA research horticulturist, is conducting organic cover crop research in Salinas, Calif.

Cover crops could bring higher yields

By Dawn Withers
Staff Writer

Something as simple as cover cropping can dramatically improve vegetable yields, new organic research is showing.

The research, now in its seventh year, is conducted at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Salinas, Calif., research station by research horticulturist Eric Brennan.

Brennan has found through several seasons of research that for organic growers, adding an inexpensive cover crop can boost yields to more than 800 cartons per acre — levels commercial conventional growers see in their fields — and suppress weeds that are not only expensive to remove but deprive the soil of needed nutrients.

The study is the longest running organic trial in the state, Brennan said.

"It provides a real comprehensive data set that gets at everything from profitability to weeds to soil quality," Brennan said.

Standing in a field a few miles outside Salinas, Brennan looks over a patchwork of plots studied in the experiment that are covered with different cover crops and seed levels.

Come spring, the plots will grow lettuce and broccoli, but during the dormant winter months they are covered with tall legume and rye cover crop mix, rye, and mustard cover crops.

Brennan said there are eight treatments for the plots in the experiment: Six plots are cover cropped, three at recommended rates, and three at three times the recommended rate.

Two more plots are left bare, except for one winter season, and treated with fertilizer. Those fields left bare sometimes failed to produce measurable yields, Brennan said, or produced less than 100 cartons per acre.

"They basically represent the three different cover crops that are commonly grown during the winter," Brennan said.

What the results have shown so far is more weeds tend to grow in plots with the recommended seeding rates, but those with higher seeding rates, especially of the legume-rye mixture, tend to see greater weed suppression and higher yields, Brennan said.

Standard seeding rates for mustard and rye cover crops may turn out to be just as effective as the higher seeding rates, Brennan said, but he won't know for sure until the end of

the project next year.

The 25 acres where the experiment is conducted are certified organic, Brennan said, and undergo the same certification inspections as any other organic grower.

The vegetables produced in the farm are sold commercially, Brennan said, through Salinas wholesalers and other companies.

Brennan said the preliminary results are applicable to commercial conventional farming as well.

Throughout the Salinas Valley many fields are not covered during the winter months, and Brennan said this is usually due to the additional cost and time it takes to mow cover crops, disc them into the fields, and let the plant material decompose long enough to provide nutrients in the soil.

But the benefits are potentially great because Brennan's experiment also shows fertilizer use is much lower for cover cropped fields, reducing nitrogen runoff into ground water and the Salinas River.

"We need to see a lot more cover cropping by conventional growers to improve the sustainability of these systems," Brennan said.

"Without doing that we're fooling ourselves that we're farming sustainably."