This newsletter is intended for people interested in commercial fruit and vegetable production, business planning and North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service meetings throughout North Carolina. For back issues of this newsletter please go to the Jones County Extension website and click on the Commercial Horticulture, Nursery & Turf menu option on the left side of the website. The website address is: http://jones.ces.ncsu.edu

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UPCOMING WORKSHOPS, MEETINGS, TOURS


May 5, 2009. Onslow County Farmers Market Board Meeting. 2 PM. Onslow County Extension Center, Jacksonville, NC. Call (910) 455-5873 for more information.

May 11, 2009. New Bern Farmers Market Board Meeting. 5:30 PM., at the law offices of Sumrell, Sugg, Carmichael, Hicks and Hart on Pollock Street, New Bern.

May 14, 2009. Jones County Communications and Coordination Council (J4C) Planning Meeting. 1 PM., Economic Development Building, Trenton, NC. Call Ivy Reid, Jones County Extension Director for more information.

NEW SECOND LOCATION

May 14, 2009. Onslow Co. Farmers Market Opening Night–Western Blvd., Jacksonville, NC. 2:30 PM – 7 PM. Come visit the Onslow County Farmers Market as they open a second location on Western Blvd. in Jacksonville. The market will open up in an open-air building behind Dick’s Sporting Goods. The Onslow County Farmers Market will continue to stay open Tuesday and Saturday from 8:30 AM – 1:30 PM at its main location on Hwy 258.
May 26-28, 2009. **Agricultural & Food Vulnerability Assessment Training Course**. Onslow County Extension Center. This training is free and is funded by a grant from the Department of Homeland Security and is led by the University of Tennessee. It is geared for people in the food industry, emergency management staff, veterinarians, Extension agents and other state and government officials.

July 11, 2009. **Jones County Heritage Day**. Trenton, NC – 10 am – 4 pm. Come to Trenton, NC to enjoy the sights, sounds and experiences of Jones County’s Heritage. Call the Jones County Extension office for more information.

**BUSINESS PLANNING**

“Oh great! Here comes another article about marketing!”

**Marketing Surveys – What Do They Tell You? Why Do Them?**

The Internet is an amazing business tool when used properly and with some frequency. Like it or not most if not all of your customers have access to and use the Internet or email in some form or fashion. As a producer, finding a way to tap into this information highway may be the difference between breaking even and being profitable in a given year.

There are a lot of ways to use the Internet for marketing. You can use traditional avenues such as buying advertising on someone else’s website, or listing your business on websites promoting local produce. You can also take advantage of the NC Department of Agriculture’s website listing local producers. No matter what approach you take, in today’s business world you need have some kind of Web presence.

While using the Internet to advertise is considered by marketing specialists as a passive approach, developing and displaying a marketing survey on your farm or farm market website helps turn your Web presence is another way to collect information from your customers. Obviously you are still relying on your customers’ ability to find your website and take the time to fill out a survey but this is still better than not asking.

There are number of online survey systems available today. There are commercial companies that offer online survey programs that let you ask 10 questions for free, which you can use for your own personal data collection. While 10 questions is not a lot, it is amazing how much marketing value you can derive from a few questions.

In addition NC Cooperative Extension has a survey system that enables Extension agents to develop online surveys to gather information about the programs. I am currently utilizing this service to support farmers markets statewide to gather information about the customers who visit NC farmers markets.

The value of using marketing surveys is two fold. One, you get real time opinions from people who are willing to take a few minutes to fill out a survey. A properly designed survey can help you acquire a lot of good information about any aspect of your farm you want to improve or change. Survey responses help identify who your customers are, where they are from, what kind of food safety concerns they have, how much they spend on average during a visit to your farm and many other things.
Two, spending money to use the Internet to collect survey data is a bit like investing in road signs for your farm. The survey data can be online 24/7, it can be purchased for a minimal cost and more importantly – unlike a road sign, it can be changed quickly to get feedback about your customers’ concerns related to a food borne illness outbreak or some other public concern that implicates agriculture. The more information you have the easier it will be for you to find ways to address or react to changes in consumer demand or perception.


LOCAL FOOD NETWORK WORKSHOP REPORT

I realize April is a tough time for many of you to pull away from the field to attend a meeting. That being the case, I wanted to give you some feedback from the Developing and Sustaining Local Food program that was held on April 23, 2009, at the Onslow County Extension Center.

We had a nice group – 39 people from 8 counties – representing many facets of the local food system. Mr. Larry Otto – L&M Companies (ret.), Dr. Ben Chapman – NC State University and Nick Augustini – NCDA&CS, were the keynote speakers highlighting the establishment of a local food networks and the food safety challenges we face today.

Here are some key points that I picked up from this program that I want to share with you:

- Food safety. GAP audits are not mandatory at this time but are being pushed by the retail industry to deflect legal liability in the case of a food borne illness outbreak. [See more in following article].
- Local food production. Marketing, packaging and developing your market for the crop before you plant is a key to success in the produce industry.
- There are numerous avenues to pursue: restaurants, grocery stores, farmers markets,
- Roadside markets and CSAs (community supported agriculture) but they all have advantages and disadvantages that you must recognize before diving into the fray.
- Market demand. Every market is different. Packaging requirements for large retail grocers are obviously different than they are for roadside markets. Product volume requirements are different for restaurants versus retail grocers. As the supplier communicating with the buy in advance of planting increases the chance to harvest 100% of the crop you grow. The downside is you have to find ways to deal with production shortfalls due to weather. Find out in advance what the buyer’s expectations are if you are short.
- Panel discussion. If you want to sell produce to Camp LeJeune all ‘local’ produce must now go through the federal government’s prime vendor program. This means the commissary cannot buy direct from local growers. Your crop has to be sold to a broker in Virginia (the designated prime vendor for this area), shipped to them, inspected with all the necessary food safety documents and then returned to Camp LeJeune for sale. Contact Nick Augustini at NCDA in Kinston if you think you are interested in pursuing this option.
- Future Needs. The goal of this meeting was to bring farmers, retail grocers, produce buyers, restaurant owners/managers and consumers together to make connections with one another to find ways to promote the production and sale of local produce. Unfortunately few retailers or restaurant owners attended so a follow up meeting specifically inviting retail grocers and farmers and second meeting between farmers and restaurant owners was requested. Cooperative Extension will be working on this and will announce dates for these meetings in the coming weeks.
Food Safety Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) Audits

This week’s global ‘swine’ flu outbreak – which is not a food-borne illness problem – is once again being unfairly linked to agriculture by some misinformed media outlets. It is a frustrating thing to watch but something few, if any of us can control.

In terms of real food-borne illness the NC Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (NCDA&CS) put out an email note this week offering cost share funds (up to $600) for producers who want to become GAP certified. They are also offering cost share funds for people wanting to test their water for the presence of E. coli (up to $200). This led to a few questions by one local grower:

Local grower:
“Is this something we need to do or should do? How do we become GAP certified and how much does that cost? Also how much does it cost to get our water tested for E.coli?”

My response:

First, what is good agriculture practices (GAP) – and where did it come from. GAP is a program designed to develop a food safety plan that documents how you manage food safety on your farm. The system is a spin off from the food safety programs that commercial processors such as Dole/Del Monte have to use and it isn’t designed for small farmers. Even for large farmers growing large acreages with the NCDA cost share it is very expensive process. If you are not selling produce to large retailers or to brokers who are shipping your produce across state lines then it probably is not cost effective to go the third-party audit route.

Second, GAP is a voluntary program at this time. Retailers (Wal-Mart, Food Lion) are driving this by requiring their suppliers to provide third-party audit food safety documentation. There is nothing at the federal or state level – at this time - that requires you have your fresh produce inspected or to be GAP certified so do not let anyone tell you any different. That said there are at least 8 pieces of legislation pending in Washington, DC that were written in response to the recent food borne illness problems that might make GAP audits mandatory one day. Until then... it’s all voluntary.

Third, the challenges and/or problem you face as a small producer to become GAP certified is the cost. The way the system is designed right now you have to be GAP certified (which may cost $1,000-$1,500 or more, plus the cost of the expenses for the inspector) for every individual crop you grow. In other words, if you grow collards, you have to pay the inspector(s) again to come back to do a second audit for squash and pay another $1,000-$1,500 for that crop.

That said I would recommend you participate in the water testing for E. coli program. That is a one to two time per year water test that is applicable across the entire farm. I have to check with one of my colleagues about where to have the tests done but I'll get that info to you ASAP. The good part about that is NCDA's cost share for water testing should cover most or all of the expense of water testing. At a minimum it is good information to have available to show your buyers/customers or if you are a certified organic producer, for your certifying agency.

Back to GAPs... in lieu of testing every individual crop, NCSU is working on materials that we
(Extension) can use to perform mock GAP audits of your farm. This review will not be of any legal value compared to a third-party audit by a certified agency but it offers you a way to examine the practices you use in relation to the kind of questions asked in official audits to ensure the food you are producing and selling is safe.

If you want to have a ‘mock audit’ done on your farm I expect to have materials from NCSU very soon. It is best to wait to do this when you are in ‘full harvest’ so that you get a clear picture of what is happening related to food safety.

Finally, I want to share a concern one grower had after listening to Dr. Chapman’s talk at the Developing and Strengthening Local Food Networks meeting that pertains to the discussion of food safety. The concern was that “after listening to the food safety talk given by Dr. Chapman it seems like we [farmers] aren’t doing anything right so why should we keep farming?”

While I understand the sentiment – because at times it does seem that government rules and regulations do not give you credit for what you are doing right – the point is that many politicians do not understand what is going on at the farm, nor do many of your customers – and like it or not the rules are being written to address the fears of the general public.

As producers of fresh produce you cannot and should not look at food safety guidelines and training as slap as another layer of regulation or as a way to put you out of business. Yes, it is a spin off of the rules large growers and processors already use but you have to look at is as a marketing tool and tell your customers – all the time, every day – that you use the latest research-based guidelines and practices available to ensure what you are growing and are selling to them is safe.

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CROP PRODUCTION:

Colorado Potato Beetle (CPB)

This relatively slow moving, incredibly voracious insect has reared its ugly head in local potato fields and gardens in 2009. With the arrival of warmer weather, populations of the CPB are on the rise. Both adult and larval stages can decimate a potato crop very quickly, making early control critical to obtain good crop yield.

While damage can be severe most potato crops can withstand some foliar damage without resulting in a loss of yield. However, left untreated an invasion of CPB can lead to 100% defoliation very quickly and once defoliation of the potato plant occurs the adults will quickly move to tomato and eggplant and other Solanacea plants. Plants in the Solanacea (nightshade) family include: potato, tomato, eggplant, petunia and certain nightshade weeds.

The Colorado potato beetle typically over winters in the adult stage in plant residue near fields or plots infested the previous year. They can fly moderate distances and are attracted to pheromones emitted by plants of the Solanacea family but they do prefer potatoes.

CPB has a history of developing resistance to insecticides rapidly and therefore, depending on the size of the planting, a combination of mechanical and chemical control measures may be necessary for complete control of this pest. So how do you control this pest?

Start with a good integrated pest management (IPM) program. Making a weekly walk through the field or garden will tell you if you have CPB and at what life stage they are in. In areas where small invasions have begun hand removal – if done frequently enough and if the plot size is small enough – may be the best control option. The adult
beetles move slowly and are easy to see as are the egg masses and picking them off the plants will offer good control.

Another possible mechanical control method is laying a layer of plastic in a trench with steep sides beside the potato row. Use a broom to sweep the adults off the plants into the trench, thereby trapping them on the slippery plastic and not allowing them to get back to the crop to lay eggs.

Any CPB nymphs caught in this trap cannot yet fly and will crawl into the trench and die.

For homeowners additional chemical control options are available. Bacillus thuringiensis- Bt - is a natural soil bacteria with insecticidal qualities that offers control of CPB. It is sold for use as an organic insecticide under a number of commercial trade names. Other chemical control options are carbaryl (Sevin) and phosmet (Imidan). Both of these products should be used after the CPB eggs have hatched – thereby making the timing of the application critical for good control.

In addition the synthetic chemical imidacloprid – a restricted use pesticide - provides excellent control of CPB. This insecticide can be applied in the furrow as an in-row drench at planting time and offers season long control of CPB. Growers must use caution on early-planted potatoes. Early applications may be too far ahead of adult beetle emergence due to cold weather, which may result in poor or inadequate control of the insect.

Imidacloprid may also be applied as a foliar application to newly hatched larvae. This application should be made only if the level of defoliation increases through the spring but do not apply a foliar application if a furrow application was made. Do not use foliar applications of any IRAC MoA class 4A insecticides, as this insect is known to develop resistance to insecticides very quickly. For this reason careful, limited use of these products is recommended. A rotation of mechanical and chemical control is going to offer the best control. Contact your local Cooperative Extension office for more information on how to effectively manage this insect.1

If you have questions about any of the information, upcoming meetings, business strategies, or crop production management issues, please call me at the Jones County Extension Center at (252) 448-9621. I can also be reached by email at: Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu

1 2009 NC Agriculture Chemicals Manual. NC State University College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, Raleigh, NC. Pg. 296. Also available online at: http://ipm.ncsu.edu/agchem/agchem.htm