August 1, 2006

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Volume 3, Number 8

Commercial Horticulture:
Future Cooperative Extension Programs, Business Planning
and Crop Production Issues

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

**Upcoming Workshops, Tours & Meetings**

**August 15, 2006.** Commercial Horticulture Advisory Committee Meeting, 6 PM. Jones County Senior Center.

**August 16, 2006.** Precision Vegetable Seeder Demonstration, at Richlands Farms on Francktown Road, Richlands, NC. 3 PM.

**August 19, 2006.** Beekeepers meeting. Onslow County Extension Center. Jacksonville, NC. Contact Jeff Morton at (910) 455-5873 for more information.

**August 21, 2006.** Small Farm Equipment & Cover Crop Workshop, 1:00 PM – 5:00 PM. Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS), Goldsboro, NC. Call CEFS at (919) 513-0954 for more information.

**September 18, 2006.** Season Extension of Vegetable Crops Workshop, 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM. CEFS, Goldsboro, NC. Call CEFS at (919) 513-0954 for more information.

**October 16, 2006.** High Tunnel Greenhouse Production Workshop, 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM. CEFS, Goldsboro, NC. Call CEFS at (919) 513-0954 for more information.

**November 10-12, 2006.** 21st Annual Tomato Disease Workshop. Mountain Horticultural Research & Extension Center. Fletcher, NC. Registration deadline October 23, 2006. Fee $50, $60 at the door. Contact Dr. Kelly Ivors at Kelly_Ivors@ncsu.edu for more information.

**December 2006.** SE Vegetable Growers Conference, Myrtle Beach, SC.

**December 2006.** Certified Crop Advisor Training, Onslow County Extension Center.
**Newsletter Survey**

I have been writing this newsletter for nearly three years and it occurred to me that in that time I have only ever received one email and just a few comments about the topics I cover. I do my best to keep the topics and information current and relevant to the challenges you face in today’s fruit and vegetable industry. If they are not I would like to know.

I have included a survey in this newsletter to address some of the questions I have for you about this newsletter. I would like to ask you to fill it out and get the results back to me in one of three ways. You can mail your survey to me at the Jones County Extension office, fax it to me at (252) 448-1243 or you can go online to the Jones County Extension website, fill it out and email me the response at Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu.

It is important to me to have your feedback in order to give you access to the best research-based information I can share in a timely. Thank you for your assistance with this survey.

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**Business Planning & Management**

**Decision Making**

We all make numerous business decisions each and every day. Taking time to read this newsletter might be one decision that may or may not be worth your time today. I hope it is.

For this article I am going to make another reference to a very good series of articles published by the Harvard Business School Press, to discuss decision making. In a book titled *Decision Making: 5 Steps to Better Results*, the authors point out five basic steps that managers must use to make good decisions. They are:

- "Establish a Context for Success
- Frame the Issue Properly
- Generate Alternatives
- Evaluate the Alternatives
- Choose the Best Alternative"

This month I want to discuss how you can establish, within your farm, the best ways to be successful, i.e., *Establish a Context for Success*. I will review the other four topics in subsequent newsletters, and try to translate these ideas as they might pertain to the fruit and vegetable business and agriculture in general.

Establishing a context for success on the farm requires you, as the farm manager, to evaluate your staff or family you want to have involved in making decisions. Do you want your son or daughter, who is straight out of NCSU, to help make business decisions in order to get a fresh perspective on the world? Do you want an older member of your family, or a spouse, to be the sole decision maker? Do you want a loyal employee to have the opportunity to step up and be more involved in the operation? Making this decision is the first step in the process.

In addition to these people, you should consider finding people outside your organization that you can bounce ideas off of. Such people will help you be a better decision maker.

Among the people you bring into this decision making process, make sure you find both proponents and opponents of your ideas and the way you manage your business. Opponents? Why invite someone to the table that does not agree with you?

Opponents can help you define the way that you operate your business. They will bring a perspective with them that all of your experience, knowledge and wisdom may be unable to discern. Your opponent’s wisdom might not come in the way of a hammer hit the head, but in the form of something as simple as a quickly spoken comment at the decision making table that helps you think of your operation in an entirely different light.

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For example, suppose you have a long-term customer that buys 40 percent of the volume you produce on your farm every year. This buyer calls tomorrow and announces they only want to buy organic produce. What do you do?

Your experience and wisdom might tell you that converting 40 percent of your business to organic production is impossible. In the short term, it will be because there is a minimum three year waiting period required in order to get a field certified under the new USDA organic labeling standards. However, if you have an opponent of conventional production (or a proponent of 100 percent organic production) at the table, they might offer an idea or a comment that can be used to keep your buyer with you until you have had time to make that transition.

Cooperative Extension’s Advisory Council system is based in part on this strategy. Cooperative Extension in the United States has used this decision making tool for nearly 100 years. Every Extension agent is expected to have an active advisory council to help make decisions and identify areas of need in our communities and industries that we focus on. Extension advisory committees not only support the programs we have underway but they also give us that sometimes unwanted perspective that provides the impetus to change our program directions into topics or communities that might not otherwise be served or are under-served.

In today’s high-speed, high-volume, low margin agriculture world, we have a lot of decisions to make each and every day. So next time you have a major decision to make that will affect the longevity of your farm, think about who you might bring to the table to discuss the problem, and use them to give you advice and offer a perspective that you might not have otherwise considered.

**Crop Production**

**Precision Vegetable Seeder Field Day**

Please save Thursday, August 16, 2006 at 3 PM, to come to Richlands Farms in Onslow County to spend two hours learning the intricacies of the precision vegetable seeder that was purchased with the grant from the Rural Advancement Foundation Institute (RAFI). A two row version of the Milton precision seeder will be available for you to take apart, study and ask questions about. I hope you can take time to come see it first hand on August 16, 2006 at 3 PM.

**Irrigation: Is it Necessary?**

Irrigation is one aspect of fruit and vegetable crop production that is ignored in the eastern US. The main reason being rainfall totals that range from 35 inches to 55 inches each year in many eastern US states. This is in contrast to the 10 inch to 15 inch rainfall totals that fall in the western United States. The question that must be asked is, “Does the rainfall in the east come with enough frequency to improve yields and maintain product quality enough to justify the investment in irrigation equipment?”

In most years the answer is maybe. In the years when rainfall comes with enough frequency, irrigation is obviously not a necessary expense. In the years when rainfall is excessive – 2005 hurricane season, investing in a big umbrella might be more appropriate than buying center pivots, rain reels or drip irrigating.

30-year average rainfall data from the State Climate Office at NCSU indicates that between May & August the daily rainfall totals range from 0.12 inches to 0.22 inches per day. If this amount fell every day of every week when temperatures averaged 85°F - 95°F, soil moisture levels would be adequate for uniform crop development. Obviously we have not had 0.2 inches of rain every day in May, June or July 2006 – more like nothing for 18 days and then 10 inches in a one or two day stretch. In the three summers I have been in eastern NC, that pattern seems to be more normal than 0.2 inches per day.

So, is the investment in irrigation in eastern NC worth the expense? Research shows irrigation greatly improves fruit and vegetable quality. In crops that are 80%-90% moisture, inadequate water supplies will affect fruit and vegetable yields, quality, flavor and appearance. Lack of water can also start the formation of physiological disorders such as hollow heart in watermelon and potatoes and blossom end rot in crops such as squash, tomatoes and cucumbers. If the crop
damage from these disorders results in 5 to 10 percent yield loss, then the investment in irrigation may or may not pay off. If the loss incurred is 20, 30 or 50 percent, then investment in irrigation will pay off.

I have included HIL (Horticulture Information Leaflet) 33E published by Dr. Doug Sanders at NCSU. This HIL has two tables indicating the water needs of each crop, as well as a table indicating the drought tolerances that most vegetable crops have and the disorders that might appear as a result of drought stress.

Collard & Cabbage Research Trial

A nitrogen fertilizer study will be planted in Onslow County in mid-August 2006. This study will look at 4 different nitrogen fertilizer rates. The goal is to determine how much of an advantage farmers can expect from split nitrogen applications in collards, as well as look at two forms of slow release nitrogen fertilizer from two different suppliers. The results of this study will be published in this newsletter in January 2007. If field research trials like this are of interest to you, please let me know. I will be happy to assist you in setting up this kind of test on your farm.

If you have questions about any of the 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.

Sincerely,

Mark Seitz
Extension Area Specialized Agent
Agriculture– Commercial Horticulture