Agent’s Overview - Soil Health

The health of agricultural soils in New Jersey continues to be an issue on our farms. Grower reliance on routine applications of nitrogen-phosphorus-potassium fertilizer may help maintain yields for awhile but can eventually degrade soil health. Poor soil health is caused by depleting dozens of other soil components which lead to an unsustainable farming practice, harm of to the environment and significant costs. What is going on with our depleted soils? Well, the problem is not just in New Jersey but nationwide. Mineral soil suffer first from the elimination of soil life. Relying on purely chemical inputs ignores and condemns the beneficial biology of soil life. Bacteria, fungi, and numerous other micro-critters are all members of this underground food web. Petro-chemical based N-P-K products produce acidic toxins against this natural chain of life. Following up the unintended assault with soil insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and excessive tillage exerts further damage to the soil rhizosphere. There are “softer” alternatives to many of these practices. While N-P-K helps provide macro-nutrients for improved plant growth with carbohydrate, protein and fat storage, such fertilizer does little for the other vital micro-infractions like vitamins, flavor factors and medicinal components. To produce such desirable traits for our local moneymakers like tomato, pepper, cantaloupe, herbs and blueberries; plants need this living food web to better supply the complex building blocks that its root system can’t obtain. To receive some of these valuable micro-nutrients, plants have evolved a feedback system to squirt a little sugar out their roots and feed their friends in the soil. These friends reciprocate by scavenging key substances in the soil for the root hairs of the crop. Unfortunately, this wonderful symbiotic relationship is destroyed by frequent and excessive use of synthetic soil chemicals. To get the most out of your soil system one needs to feed soils biologically. There are tons of unused horse manure around that of... (Continued on page 2)
Concentrating on food quality is something our grandfa-thers really did well before the advent of advanced labor saving ma-chinery and plant protection chemi-cals. They manured their field deeply and selected varieties on the basis of taste—not transportability. Better taste indicates better food quality—generally our tongues detect sugar or acid, salty or bitter lycopene or carotenoid and we can then determine what is good for our bodies.

Parents are especially be-coming aware of such important nutritional health needs especially for children. After all, we are consuming high nutritional produce. This is the “story” we want to tell our customers—we’re not just commodity crops coming from some mega-industrial farm thousands of miles away. We are the stewards of the land, we’re proud of our produce and here’s why……..Growing sustainably is good in both the long and short run. So please think about the biological life in your soil and how improved soil health can fit your operation. Help stop…A short course in how to build a soil, enrich food quality and reinvigorate the green machine under our feet. As Presi-dent Franklin implied, unsustain-able Ag slowly destroys our soil—Rain or Shine

Vegetable crops (weekly) • Fruit (weekly) • Landscape, Nursery & Turf (biweekly) • Cranberry (biweekly)
Tom Stenzel, President of the United Fresh Produce Association, stopped by the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton for a town hall style meeting arranged by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture. He spoke to a standing-room only audience of growers and buyers of early spring crops, bedded plants, vegetable plants and nursery stock. South Jersey growers of early spring crops are welcome and Kevin Flaim of Panther Brand will be bringing up a wide range of early Jersey products to help round out the produce line.

Stenzel stated that there is an increasing desire for local produce among many consumers, but no standard definition. Some retailers use distance to consumers ... other use state designations like Jersey Fresh. For example a Texas Grown promotion may still come from 1,000 miles away due to the size of the state. He also said some consumers may actually be looking for the “authenticity of the farmer” rather than the miles. COOL ... or state marketing programs, like Vidalia onions or Jersey Fresh along with the name of the farm on the box, to identify the grower. Stenzel identified three opportunities that will yield great benefits for fruit and vegetable growers. First, after 35 years in existence, the national Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program will be providing vouchers to purchase fresh produce for the first time. Each eligible mother will be given $8 per month, there are over 500,000 eligible women in New York alone, and overall, there will be $500 million available through the program.

The second opportunity is in the new Farm Bill that sets the USDA agenda for the next five years. This Farm Bill addresses the unique needs of specialty crops, including fruits and vegetables, by devoting $3 billion to key areas – immigration reform, small business ... farmers in the position of policing and enforcement! Food Safety—there WILL be reforms in GAPs, food safety, imports and traceability. Stenzel stated that there is an increasing desire for local produce among many consumers, but no standard definition. Some retailers use distance to consumers ... other use state designations like Jersey Fresh. For example a Texas Grown promotion may still come from 1,000 miles away due to the size of the state. He also said some consumers may actually be looking for the “authenticity of the farmer” rather than the miles. COOL regulations allow regional or state marketing programs, like Vidalia onions or Jersey Fresh along with the name of the farm on the box, to identify the grower.
The industry has adjusted to the market and found new ways to add value to products. The New Jersey horticulture industry that includes greenhouse and nursery has been able to hold steady in the economy over the past two years. While some areas of agriculture have seen declines, NJ horticulture has maintained sales at around $368.5 million dollars, which represents 43% of the states entire agricultural.

The State had two major differences to deal with in 2007 and 2008. The first was the recent closing of Princeton Horticulture. This was a huge loss to the state as a provider of quality nursery stock grown in the garden state. On the up side, the nursery growers have risen to the challenges by filling in the gap that was left when they closed. Growers like Hugh McKitrick, 52, Colts Neck, who is a national supplier of lining out stock to the nursery industry specializing in boxwood and other deer resistant plants, has expanded his family’s nursery along with other state growers to meet the demand of the ever-expanding housing market. “Currently we are setting ourselves up to deal with pent up demand for housing, if we don’t plant now we can’t cash in later.

The second big hit the industry took was the new tax on wholesale plant material initiated last year. Buyers of plant material adjusted to the increase in costs by reducing their bottom line. One way they did this is to find local growers so that they could cut their fuel costs and still be able to make a profit on their installations. At the recent Home Show at Brookdale Community College, all the landscape exhibitors expressed interest at finding new producers within the state for landscape materials. They want to provide the best quality plants for their customers, and at the same time, reduce lost time by putting together growers of the plant material they can use within a certain mileage radius.

Mommont county’s exceptional soil, helps New Jersey’s production growers to be able to deliver a finished product to the market that is superior in health and vigor. New Jersey’s central location also makes it ideal for providing plants to the industry at reduced shipping costs. The need to bring plants in from across the country is unnecessary when they are available right here. This also fits into the “green” customers want, as the demand for environmental stewardship increases. As Ellen Leroy-Reed found out in her article in the American Nurseryman, “The landscape and nursery industries “Were green before ‘green’ was cool.” Putting the industry in harmony with the current move towards earth friendly solutions in lessening the need for fossil fuel consumption there is strong evidence that even in a struggling economy, the state is a leader in the plant market place, providing up to date innovative research results to the nursery industry in an evergreen environment that is very encouraging.

The Return of the Moreton F1 Tomato ... or the Case of the Missing Parent Seed

Rediscover the Jersey Tomato is a Rutgers NJAES project with a mission to refocus research and extension effort on the Jersey Tomato flavor” New Jersey is famous for. Part of our project includes identifying excellent eating tomato varieties that were well-adapted to our growing conditions and commercially known by New Jersey farmers back in the tomato glory days of the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s. Bringing back the Rutgers’ Ramapo F-1 tomato fulfilled part of the mission for the mid- or main season, but one variety does not a Jersey Tomato make. Jersey tomatoes are a portfolio of varieties that do well under our climatic conditions in a different range of soils and ripening at different times of the season. Ramapo is one among other tasty varieties maturing mid- to late season. There is a problem with main season maturity, according to Jack Rabin, Associate Director for Farm Programs at Rutgers NJAES. The New Jersey tomato season commences in early July, when thousands of anxious consumers are waiting for their first juicy bite of a Jersey Tomato. With a lack of a tasty early season variety, Ramapo’s missing its opening act.

Enter Joe Musumeci of Eastern Seed Services, a New Jersey seed processor and Rutgers ag graduate, who is handling Rutgers Ramapo tomato seed sales to commercial growers. Growing up on a South Jersey tomato farm, Musumeci recalled how the early season variety that Jersey Tomato growers referred to as “the July 4th tomato”. The Moreton F-1 tomato was Harris’ first F-1 hybrid release in 1953. “For 6 to 10 years,” says Musumeci, “Moreton was – probably the first hybrid grown on a large scale in New Jersey. Moreton was a soft tomato and was eventually replaced by Red Pack which was later renamed Pik-Red which had less cracking, but didn’t have the flavor of Moreton.”

Musumeci knew Harris Seeds had discontinued the production of Moreton F1 hybrid seed. He contacted Harris about the Rutgers project and about re-introducing Moreton seed. Harris provided Musumeci with the Moreton parent line seed.

But, what happened to Moreton that took it out of production? According to Mark Willis of Harris Seeds, Harris Seeds was sold to another company and in 1991 when the New York facility was shut down and its stock seed moved to California, one of the Moreton parent lines was lost.

Back in their New York facility, around 1994, a former Harris employee showed up with a Ball jar of seed he purchased from the auction of the Harris Company. The seed was the missing parent line of the Moreton tomato. And, according to Willis, as the story goes, the lost seeds were traded in exchange for a life-time supply of fava bean seed. Reinstated around 1995, Moreton seed was produced until 2004, when large production was no longer profitable.

Musumeci found a seed grower to produce a small batch of Moreton that is being reintroduced in 2009 in a cooperative agreement between Eastern Seed Services, Harris Seeds and Rutgers NJAES. For the 2009 growing season, Rutgers will be conducting consumer-driven research to find out how this early season variety rates amongst gardeners and consumers for flavor and production.

The annual Vegetable Growers Meeting for the Central Jersey was held on February 6, 2009 at the RCE conference room in Monmouth County. Over 130 participants received agricultural information from various agencies like Farm Bureau with President Richard Nieuwenhuis, Monmouth County Board of Agriculture with President Tom Frieberger, NJDA, FHA, and NRCS; as well as outstanding Rutgers Extension speakers Pat Hastings, Gerry Ghiudi, Brad Majek, Andy Weynandt, Wes Kline, Bill Hlubik and Rutgers Associate Director Jack Rabin. Key topics included updates on agency activities, vegetable pest management, pesticide use, food safety and alternative energy. There was plenty of good dialogue and comments. Meeting evaluations indicated a high level of satisfaction with this annual event.

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Nina McKitrick

The 2009 Central Jersey Turf & Ornamental Meeting

Dr. Mike Raupp from the University of Maryland, Sean Healy of the Mommont County Mosquito Commission and Carl Nordstrom, Executive Director of the NJ Nursery and Landscape Association were some of the highlighted presenters.

Evaluations provided high marks for the educational value of the entire program as well as for the accommodations and food for this new venue.

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The 2009 Central Jersey Turf & Ornamental Institute Conference was held on March 4, 2009, at the Battleground Country Club in Manalapan, NJ. Over 190 nursery, greenhouse, landscape and turf maintenance professionals attended the full-day program.