

# *Sustainable Agriculture*

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## **Weed scientists, farmers 'learn how to learn' weed management**

Some weed scientists at the University of Minnesota are finding that exchanging information, innovation and changing perceptions of farm systems are all crucial parts of moving toward sustainable agriculture. In 1998, Nick Jordan, Jeff Gunsolus, Roger Becker, Steve Simmons and Sue White, all University weed scientists, organized two experimental weed management "learning groups" of 18 members.

The groups emphasized farmer knowledge. "We recognize that farmers know more about their farms than anyone else," says White.

The project began with White recruiting participants--searching for a diverse group of farmers in size of operation and the agricultural practices they used. A soybean growers' group and a vegetable growers' group were brought together, each with three research scientists, two extension educators and 13 farmers. Finding people with a variety of viewpoints was essential. One farmer said, "The blend of conventional and non-conventional people serves to push the envelope faster and more efficiently."

Researchers were amazed at how much information farmers shared. One farmer noted, "Farming has such long lead times that it can take years to figure out what's wrong. If I can talk to others and speed up the learning process, that's really valuable."

The major goal was not just to provide a space for dialogue, but also to initiate what the scientists called transformational learning--changing the way farmers approached their farm and their practices as a result. The hope was to foster an approach to weed management that considered long-term consequences, integrated the whole farm into understanding weed problems, and was preventive instead of reactive.

"I feel much more confident," one farmer said. "Things keep getting better and better, as far as weed management, and not having to become more dependent on purchased inputs, and becoming more dependent on my own management." Another farmer spoke of coming to see himself as a manager whose "labor becomes critical, something valuable." Jordan concludes, "They (farmers) feel much more comfortable in thinking about their farms as a whole."

For Extension educators, learning groups are a major step away from the traditional field day setting, where educators sometimes lecture to over 100 farmers. Becker says that the learning groups give educators a chance to provide broader knowledge to farmers. A farmer agreed: "It was an ongoing thing, the same kind of thinking coming around at you for two years, with the same people." --By Daniel Ungier, MISA intern. For a more detailed version, see [www.misa.umn.edu/Other/weedmanagement.html](http://www.misa.umn.edu/Other/weedmanagement.html)

## **Will farmers profit from 'functional' foods?**

Some 85 percent of American consumers want to learn more about "functional" foods, according to a survey by the American Dietetic Association (ADA).

The ADA survey concluded consumers are concerned about nutrition, know they could and should eat healthier, but don't want to sacrifice taste and convenience. "Functional foods provide a health benefit beyond basic nutrition," says Zachary Fore, a regional cropping systems specialist with the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

The ADA defines functional foods as "any potentially healthful food or food ingredient that may provide a health benefit beyond the traditional nutrients it contains." Fore says examples of functional foods include products with oat fiber or soy protein (heart healthy) and butter-type spreads that contain benecol (cholesterol reducing).

"What does this have to do with agriculture? Potentially, a great deal," Fore says. "Functional foods may require production of customized raw materials. The functional foods market in the U.S. alone is currently at \$8 billion per year, and growing at eight percent annually."

Don't confuse functional foods with "farmaceuticals." "Farmaceuticals are likely to be produced on a very small number of acres by a very small number of farms," Fore says. "But functional foods will be produced on many acres and provide opportunity for many farmers."

Whoever is first to identify and provide what consumers want will profit from functional foods. "But if the past is any indication, it won't be farmers," Fore says "Consumer expenditures for food products have grown dramatically in the last 30 years, but what farmers are getting has grown very little."

Consumers are paying more, but farmers are not sharing in that increased value. "Who is getting it? The food companies who are adding value to the raw materials," Fore says.

Farmers can profit from the functional foods market, but they won't profit by waiting for someone to come and offer a premium price for products they produce, Fore says. To share in the profits, Fore says farmers need to work with commodity groups, universities and other support organizations to develop and own nutritionally enhanced plant and animal traits. Farmers must also own the processing and/or marketing of functional food products.

"A lot of money will be made in the functional foods business," Fore says. "If farmers are wise and aggressive in their thinking, develop partnerships and invest in well-researched value-added opportunities, it can be them." Fore may be reached at (218) 253-4401, [forex002@umn.edu](mailto:forex002@umn.edu).

### **Rodale's 'The New Farm' magazine is resurrected on-line**

You may remember reading Rodale's "The New Farm" magazine, which ceased publication several years ago. Now you can see it on the Internet at [newfarm.org/index.shtml](http://newfarm.org/index.shtml).

The magazine is updated daily and written for a national audience. It will soon have an archives section from the print version going back to the 1970s. A sneak preview: a 1979 article by Wendell Berry titled "Getting Along With Animals: For the good stockman, ownership becomes a complex relationship, based on liking and familiarity."

### **Organic price index gives farmers a new way to set prices**

A new organic price index developed by the Rodale Institute is designed to help farmers market their products competitively. The index is modeled after the Chicago Board of Trade's price index for conventionally grown produce.

The organic index will be updated each Tuesday and represents prices for products gathered on Monday of the same week. For example, for the week of Feb. 24, 2003, index prices for a dozen brown organic eggs were \$2.27, compared to \$1.34 for conventional eggs. A bushel of organic corn was \$4.25, compared to \$2.49 for conventional corn.

Check the index at Rodale's "The New Farm" website at [newfarm.org/index.shtml](http://newfarm.org/index.shtml).

--Adapted from the Philadelphia Inquirer, Feb. 28, 2003

### **MISA board executive committee elected**

JoAnne Berkenkamp is the new chair of the MISA board of directors. JoAnne joined the MISA Board in 2002. Outside of her role as board chair, she has a management consulting practice based in St. Paul. Her work primarily supports both non-profit organizations and for-profit enterprises in agriculture and environmental arenas. She also leads a national Learning Community for marketing campaigns that promote local and sustainably grown foods. Additionally, JoAnne serves on the board of Mississippi Market, a natural foods co-op retailer in the Twin Cities. She has worked in some 20 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. JoAnne has a master's in public policy from Harvard University, as well as a bachelor's degree in finance.

Bud Markhart, professor in the Department of Horticultural Sciences, was elected to serve a second term as vice chair. His interests are in environmental physiology and organic growing systems for commercial production and homeowner gardening. He teaches "Growing Plants Organically; What it Means to be Green," and is a member of the Sustainable Agriculture Graduate Minor faculty. His research interests focus on the use of cover crops in organic production systems, the effect of low root zone temperature on crop growth and hydroponics.

Jan O'Donnell will serve as the secretary/treasurer of the board for 2003. Until last year, Jan was the executive director of the Minnesota Food Association. Jan has a strong commitment to food cooperatives and spent ten years as a manager of food cooperatives. She purchased a farm in Spooner, Wis. in 2001 and is busy raising chickens, lambs and beef cattle, in addition to tending a large garden. Jan is also the coordinator of the Northeast chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association.

For more information, contact MISA at (612) 625-8235, toll-free (800) 909-6472 or [misamail@umn.edu](mailto:misamail@umn.edu).

### **Check the new organic newsletter published by MOSES**

The Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) is pleased to announce the first "Organic Update Newsletter." This monthly electronic newsletter offers news and information about the organic farming industry in the Upper Midwest.

To view the newsletter, go to [www.mosesorganic.org/update/one.htm](http://www.mosesorganic.org/update/one.htm). Contact MOSES with any questions at [jody@mosesorganic.org](mailto:jody@mosesorganic.org), or (715) 667-5501.

### **Applications for Organic Transition grants due March 31**

The USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education and Extensive Service is soliciting applications for its Organic Transition grants for fiscal year 2003. These grants are available as part of the Integrated Pest Management Grants Program.

Applications must be received by March 31, 2003. For more information, see [www.reeusda.gov/1700/funding/rfaintegrated\\_03.htm](http://www.reeusda.gov/1700/funding/rfaintegrated_03.htm). Or, contact Tom Bewick at [tbewick@reeusda.gov](mailto:tbewick@reeusda.gov), or (202) 401-3356.

### **NCR-SARE announces call for Professional Development Program proposals**

The North Central Region of the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (NCR-SARE) is requesting proposals for competitive grants in its Professional Development Program in sustainable agriculture. The deadline for proposals is April 11, 2003. Applicants must reside in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota or Wisconsin.

NCR-SARE will award about \$350,000 to fund professional development projects to educators within the Cooperative Extension Service (CES), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NCRS) and other governmental agencies. Educators and service personnel in the non-profit and for-profit sectors of the food and fiber system are also eligible. Projects may be two to three years long and involve educators from one or more states.

More information is available at: (402) 472-7081, [ncrsare@unl.edu](mailto:ncrsare@unl.edu), or [www.sare.org/ncrsare/2003PDPCallforProposals.pdf](http://www.sare.org/ncrsare/2003PDPCallforProposals.pdf).

### **Field drying corn is topic of April 3 field day**

A field day on field drying corn is scheduled April 3, 2003 at the Marvin Jensen Farm, 2123 County Road 1 SW, Evansville, Minn. It's sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program.

Eight varieties of corn with eight rows of each variety have been left unharvested since fall 2002. Most will be harvested in March with a portion left unharvested for people to observe the amount of stalk breakage. The harvested portion will enable people to observe the amount of field loss and will be economically analyzed.

The session starts at 1 p.m. For more information, including directions to the farm, call (320) 965-2763.

### **Living Green Expo is April 12-13 at Minnesota State Fairgrounds**

You can get the latest ideas on clean transportation, home energy use, renewable energy and healthy food at the Living Green Expo April 12-13. Other topics include home building and remodeling, yard and garden care, water conservation and quality, recreation and leisure, household products and practices and sustainability concepts.

The free event will be at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds in St. Paul. For more information, visit the website at [www.livinggreenexpo.org](http://www.livinggreenexpo.org), or call (612) 331-1099.

### **Calendar of events, 2003**

These events are sponsored by numerous organizations. More information is available on MISA's website: [www.misa.umn.edu](http://www.misa.umn.edu). Also check the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota's website at [www.sfa-mn.org](http://www.sfa-mn.org).

March 21-22. **Thirteenth Annual Environmental Education in Minnesota Conference**, Rosemount Community Center, (218) 384-3511, [dhimango@umn.edu](mailto:dhimango@umn.edu), or [naaee.org/maee](http://naaee.org/maee).

March 25-26. **Four-State Forage Conference**, Baraboo, Wis., (608) 223-1111.

July 29-31. **Upper Midwest Grazing Conference**, Midway Best Western, Lacrosse, Wis., (563) 583-6496.

Aug. 16-17. **Third Annual Windy River Renewable Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Fair in Todd County**, (218) 568-8624, [davidb@uslink.net](mailto:davidb@uslink.net), or [www.sustainablefarmingcentralmn.com](http://www.sustainablefarmingcentralmn.com).

## **What we're about**

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Also check MISA's home page at [www.misa.umn.edu](http://www.misa.umn.edu).

Our mission statement: **To help bring people together to influence the future of agriculture and rural communities to achieve socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable farms and communities.**

To stimulate thinking and discussion about sustainability, we try to present items that reflect different points of view. This being the case, we aren't promoting and don't necessarily agree with everything we publish.