

Sustainable Agriculture

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Making money by growing weeds is the goal of this project

Yes, you read that right—it's a feasibility study to develop the profit potential and economies of scale for growing weeds. But the "weeds" are plants grown for the pharmaceutical trade, and they must be organically produced. Examples include dandelions, catnip and nettles.

Many species of native and naturalized plants currently regarded as weeds have known markets domestically. And some are actually being imported to fill U.S. demands in the pharmaceutical trade, according to Renne Soberg, a Lakeville, Minn., producer. He's received a grant from the Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop the profit potential of these plants.

Plant material harvested for the pharmaceutical trade must be totally free from the use of chemicals. "But this assurance cannot always be made for plant material produced in foreign countries," Soberg says. "This has created a market for domestically produced, certified organic, plant material in this country."

Plant material was often imported for sound economic reasons, Soberg says, since producing it was very labor intensive and overseas labor was cheaper. "But if technology can be introduced to develop economies of scale, there's room for real profit potential."

Soberg has established a growing area in an old cattle lot where weeds had been firmly established. After working the ground, he's developing an herb nursery. He plans to test markets and evaluate profit potentials in the fall of 1998. He's already grown and sold nettles to out-of-state markets. Soberg says nettles are used in shampoo products and there's a strong demand for them.

Soberg can be reached at Box 254, Lakeville, MN, 55044, (612) 469-2527.

Agriculture has "cashed in its good will" with the public

Agriculture has "cashed in its good will" and the public holds it accountable for environmental damage and displeasing aesthetics, says Robert von Bernuth, a visiting professor at the University of Minnesota.

"We've forgotten the lessons from our grandfathers about land stewardship and crop rotations. Instead, we've substituted inputs for long-term sustainability," he says.

Agriculture has been much attuned to economics—producing food at low costs. This has been good in the short run, von Bernuth says, but in the long run agriculture is taking a beating through public opposition to pollution and ugly aesthetics such as "feedlots with tin pole sheds." In Minnesota, citizen action groups are pushing for strict enforcement of feedlot regulations, limits on animal units, odor standards and minimal areas per animal unit.

However, it's not negative to view agriculture as an industry, von Bernuth says, and the term "factory farm" should not be an insult. "Consumers have said they want cheap food of consistent quality. The way to do this is to produce everything the same. But some costs of low-priced food are passed on to the public through environmental problems such as water pollution," he says.

Von Bernuth, a professor of biosystems engineering at Michigan State University, is one of three holders of an endowed chair in agricultural systems at the University of Minnesota. He, Minnesota farmer Carmen Fernholz and agricultural marketing consultant Pat Henderson are studying controversial livestock production practices in Minnesota.

Von Bernuth can be reached at (517) 432-6379, or vonbern@egr.msu.edu.

Composted garbage becomes bedding for cattle feedlots

Composting municipal solid waste (MSW) breaks down the organic components of garbage such as paper, food scraps and yard waste into the organic material known as compost. It reduces the load on landfills and the compost can presently be used as soil amendments on fields, gardens, lawns, nurseries and golf courses.

Now, a new University of Minnesota research project shows that MSW compost can also be used for bedding in cattle feedlots. Cattle in the study remained healthy and clean on composted MSW. And for some feedlot operators, the compost could be a good alternative to corn stalks or newsprint for bedding.

The research was done at Praireland Solid Waste Management, Truman, Minn., and Gilland Feedlot, Inc., Morgan, Minn. The composting lasts 90 days and involves sorting non-compostables manually and magnetically. Some non-compostable materials are recycled or used for production of electricity while others are sent to landfills.

The compost process at Praireland involves grinding the material, adjusting the moisture content, piling into composting silos, curing, refining and screening. This yields a consistent quality compost with minimum inorganic content.

MSW compost can replace corn stalks and paper bedding. Due to more interest in recycling paper, paper bedding is no longer affordable to feedlot owners. And using MSW compost as bedding reduces or eliminates costs of harvesting and storing corn stalks. Also, leaving corn stalks in the field provides organic matter.

The absorbency of MSW compost is about four times less than corn stalks (on a weight basis), so more bedding tonnage is required per feeding period. However, manure concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus aren't changed, so manure application rates don't change relative to established practices for corn stalks.

More than 50 percent of household trash is organic waste that can be composted. Examples include vegetable and food scraps, paper, coffee grounds, egg shells, leaves, sawdust, weeds, wood, and plant trimmings.

The researchers are developing a fact sheet along with work sheets for feedlot owners to use in estimating the value of MSW compost to replace traditional bedding material for yearling cattle feedlots. For more information, contact animal scientist Alfredo DiCostanzo at (612) 624-1272, or water quality and waste management specialist Tom Halbach at (612) 625-3135.

“Images of women farmers” is topic of video

Women in Sustainable Agriculture (WISA) has produced a video entitled “Getting Down to Earth: Images of Women Farmers.” The video is based on a photo exhibit developed by the group to draw attention to the work of women farmers. Funding to support the project came from WISA and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA).

“The Getting Down to Earth photo project has been a labor of love for me,” said Julie Michel-Widmer, a farmer from New Prague, Minn. “This project was a great way to show that women who farm do have a voice. It validates women of the land and shows that their work really makes a difference.”

The photo exhibit has been seen around the state, and will open at the Larson Gallery in the Saint Paul Campus Student Center Oct. 20, 1997. An opening reception will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 24. The video is available for \$16 plus \$4 shipping and handling. Contact the MISA office on the St. Paul Campus: Phone 625-0220; 1-800-909-6472; or misamail@tc.umn.edu.

U of M course teaches about the lives and work of migrant farm workers

“The Migrant Experience in Minnesota” is the topic of a four-credit University of Minnesota course offered in the winter quarter. From 15,000 to 20,000 migrant farm workers come to harvest Minnesota’s crops every year; the course is based on their work and lives.

From primarily a legal perspective, students will examine the working conditions and socio-economic reality of migrant farm workers in Minnesota. Topics studied will include a range of disciplines such as history, public policy, education, public health, law, and agricultural economics. Both graduate and undergraduate students from these and other disciplines are welcome.

In light of the changing socio-economic scenario of rural Minnesota, which includes a growing Latino population, this course will address the impact of new technologies and new welfare and immigration laws. Alternative strategies to address systemic inequalities will be explored. The course, “Chicano Studies 5920,” is a prerequisite for summer internship and/or research experience opportunities with migrant-serving agencies. It meets from 4-7 p.m. Tuesdays.

The University-Migrant Project offers a related opportunity: The U-Migrant Project Internship Program involves an intensive work and/or research experience in the summer with migrant-serving agencies. Students enrolled in the winter course can apply for this four-credit program and 10-15 applicants will be selected. Paid internships, research grants and internship grants are available. Selections are made by Feb. 15. For more information call (612) 625-6389.

Fact sheets help simplify CRP sign-up

Fact sheets that reduce the complexity of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enrollment process are now available. You can get one at local offices of the University of Minnesota Extension Service or Natural Resource Conservation Service.

The two-page fact sheet highlights the major components landowners should focus on when offering land for enrollment. Components are establishing beneficial cover, limiting offers to the most fragile lands and lowering the bid price.

The 16th CRP sign-up lasts through Nov. 14. It’s designed to encourage new bids as well as provide

another enrollment opportunity for landowners whose offers were rejected during the 15th sign-up or whose contracts expire this fall or in 1998.

The publication was prepared jointly by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Board of Soil and Water Resources, University of Minnesota Extension Service and Pheasants Forever. The CRP program is the single largest and most popular federal conservation program.

Another source of help with CRP bids is the Conservation Options Hotline (402) 994-2021. Located in Nebraska, the hotline offers advice to farmers throughout the Midwest.

Conference on “The Soul of Agriculture” set for Nov. 14-16

A national conference, “The Soul of Agriculture: A New Production Ethic for the 21st Century,” is scheduled Nov. 14-16 in Minneapolis, Minn. It’s sponsored by the Center for Respect for Life and Environment and is part of an effort to develop a new agricultural production ethic and mobilize broad support for its adoption. It will be held at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute.

The effort was inspired by “The Spirit of the Soil: Agriculture and Environmental Ethics,” a book by Paul B. Thompson, professor at Purdue University. The book examines environmental problems in industrial agriculture and challenges environmentalists to think more deeply and creatively about the ethical dimensions of agriculture’s impact on the environment.

Thompson will speak at the conference. Registration is \$80 before Nov. 1. Your check can be sent to the Soul of Agriculture Project, 3124 Patterson Pl., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20015, or fax it with credit information to (202) 537-0192. For more information contact Roger Blobaum at (202) 537-0191.

U of M president to speak at Agri-Growth Council meeting

University of Minnesota President Mark Yudof will be the featured luncheon speaker at the 1997 Minnesota Agri-Growth Council’s annual meeting Nov. 20 at the St. Paul Radisson Hotel. The keynote address will be given by Tres Lund, chief executive officer of the Twin City-based Lund Foods Stores, Inc. Also speaking will be Mike Martin, dean of the University’s College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences.

Registration for the full day’s program is \$85. For registration information, call LeAnn Bush at (612) 854-1665.

SFA “Growing for Market” workshop set for Nov. 1

The Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) of Northeast Minnesota’s fall workshop covers market production of fruit and vegetables plus fresh and dried flowers. The sessions, at Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Duluth, are designed for both beginning and established market growers. There is no registration fee. Call (218) 727-1414 for information.

About this newsletter...

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We're always looking for story ideas. Send them to the editor: Jack Sperbeck, 405 Coffey Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108, (612) 625-1794. E-mail: jsperbeck@extension.umn.edu. Other editorial board members: Helene Murray (612) 625-0220, murra@021.tc.umn.edu; Tom Wegner (612) 374-8400, twegner@extension.umn.edu; and Bill Wilcke (612) 625-8205, wwilcke@extension.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.