

What Cornell Cooperative Extension can do for Organic Farmers

By Jim Ochterski, CCE South Central New York Agriculture Team

As cold winds blew outside the Candor Fire Hall in late February 2003, sixteen farm operators (mostly organic), four regional Cornell Cooperative Extension Educators, and representatives from Northeast Organic Network (NEON) and NOFA-NY gathered to exchange ideas about programs and services that Cornell Cooperative Extension can offer in South Central New York. Knowing that many organic farmers have distanced themselves from the Extension system, we sought out those suggestions that could be of greatest practical benefit. Our conversation was lively and wide-ranging, and included the voices of all present.

One thread of understanding running through this meeting was that at times, Extension has not been recognized for providing useful information to organic farmers. By fine-tuning the questions asked of Extension, and the answers provided by Extension, a new level of cooperation could be at hand. Here is an example:

Old question: *Can you give me recommendations for controlling X beetles organically?*
Old answer: *Probably not, but we can give you an IPM approach.*

New question: *Can you help me identify and understand the life cycle of the X beetle, so I can devise a way to reduce crop damage?*
New answer: *Yes . . . let's figure out the bug, go over the life cycle, and consider possible approaches.*

Honestly, the answers you can get from Cornell Cooperative Extension will vary from region to region, based on staffing levels, staff experience with organic production, and the priorities of the local offices. Nonetheless, organic farmers and Extension can build up to higher levels of communication, idea exchange, and consumer education.

Below are some of the points addressed in the South Central New York organic farm / Extension regional meeting. They are intended to expand your understanding of what organic farms can expect from the Cooperative Extension system.

What Extension is already providing to organic farmers:

- One-on-one assistance with pest identification, understanding pest life cycles, and soil health concerns.
- Extension newsletter articles about cultural practices that apply to organic farming. Occasional pieces about other organic farmers.
- Cornell web site visits for articles and information.
- Soil testing and recommendations for soil amendments that do not specify source of nutrients.
- Occasional farm visits, though not enough to be a significant Extension activity so far.
- Organic Dairy Farm Business Summary.
- Arranged farm tours and non-production farm workshops (business planning, marketing, grants).
- Recommended varieties for fruit and vegetable plantings.
- Irrigation and pond management recommendations.
- Documentation of "what works on farms" – Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education model of technology transfer.

Topics listed as priority by organic producers at this meeting:

Consumer education & marketing

- Providing buyers with a clearer explanation of organic farming and reasons to purchase locally grown food.
- Nutrition comparison between organic and non-organic food.
- Display-exhibit about encouraging consumption of local food.

Production

- Dealing with plant diseases and insects - especially during outbreak years when pressure is high
- Lack of good organic options for some of the major pests especially when pressure is high (flea beetle, Colorado potato beetle, and potato leaf hopper)
- Herd health; fly control around livestock, worming organically, mastitis control
- Apple thinners
- Fact sheets for organic pest management
- Irrigation and water management practices
- Frost protection ideas
- Dealing with weather, hoop house use, and crop planning for weather fluctuation.
- Cover crops – choices, benefits of cover crops, timing of tilling, nutrient value.
- Seed production and breeding

What Cornell Cooperative Extension can do for organic farmers (coupled with assistance noted above):

- Identify troublesome pests and provide understanding of pest life cycles.
- Soil sampling and testing for optimum soil health.
- Improve communication about what Extension is offering to farms.
- Focus on existing strengths of Extension system to assist organic producers.
- Avoid positioning Extension as authority on organic production.
- Educate public about the decisions they make as consumers.
- Avoid being “wishy-washy” when asked direct questions about conventional versus organic and sustainable production methods.

Suggestions for a more successful relationship between Cornell Cooperative Extension and organic farmers:

- Extension staff should visit organic farms.
- Have additional regional meetings to gather and prioritize ideas and projects.
- Host meetings for specific commodity needs – vegetable, dairy, livestock, fruit, and integrated systems.
- Include organic information in newsletters.
- Educate consumers by promoting organic home gardening; educate children about food choices and eating local and fresh.
- Circulate lists of information sources for organic producers.

These ideas are forming the basis of improved Extension outreach to organic farms in South Central New York. If you have additional items to add, please keep us all informed.

Comments about this article can be directed to Jim Ochterski, CCE South Central New York Agriculture Team, (607) 535-7161, jao14@cornell.edu. This article is reprinted by permission from the mid-spring 2003 newsletter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association.