

Integrated Pest Management Benefits Farm and Consumer

Today's consumer is educated and more and more people want to know about how their food is treated and where it comes from. Words such as "organic" and "sustainable" that were once reserved for a small population of foodies or environmentalists are now making their way into everyday vocabulary. As a result, farmers are reacting to this new shift in food culture and are learning about alternative growing and treatment methods.

For three generations, The Orr Family Farm has been owned and operated by George S. Orr & Sons, Inc. Today, this 1,000-acre farm is managed by Mike and Mark Orr. And, two years ago, Katy Orr-Dove returned to manage the farm's retail market.

"Our family has a responsibility to the future stewards of our land, and to future customers," she explained. "That's why we are implementing new farming methods; we are flexible and open to change."

Educating the Consumer

According to Katy, many people believe that there are only two types of farming: conventional and organic. However, a continuum lies between the two – integrated pest management (IPM) – an effective and environmentally-sensitive approach to pest management.

IPM is based on a combination of common-sense practices. Its programs use current, comprehensive information on the life cycles of pests and their interaction with the environment. This information, in combination with available pest-control methods, is used to manage pest damage by the most economical means, and with the least possible hazard to people, property, and the environment.

The Orr Family Farm has practiced IPM for years, however, new pest management strategies have recently become available that provide additional safeguards for the environment, worker/applicator, and the consumer (less pesticides and lower toxicity pesticides used on food). However, most of these new tools are more specific in activity (affect one or two pests, rather than multiple pests); require more critical timing (pest-stage specific); command a greater knowledge base; and are more expensive.

Additionally, the proper use of these new tools requires more monitoring by the grower, but it can also result in reduced pesticide use and cost; and improvements in fruit quality because management strategies are implemented at the optimum time, based on monitoring information.

So, how are these new strategies to be implemented? Dr. Alan Biggs, Extension Specialists from the West Virginia University Tree Fruit Research Farm in Kearneysville, WV shared information with the Orr Family Farm about the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) which has provided funding in previous years to help enhance the IPM practices at Orr's Orchards.

The incentive payment provided by NRCS made it possible for growers to implement these strategies and to maintain the economic viability and sustainability of the orchard business. And, the consumer benefits from having food with lower levels and less toxic pesticide residues.

Funding from NRCS for the IPM program at Orr's has ended in 2011, but the Orr family plans on continuing portions of the program that they have found especially beneficial to their crops.

Philip Bolyard, who manages the IPM program, explains that the program incorporates monitoring for specific insects and other diseases. All trees are monitored for both insects and plant diseases to ensure that pesticides are being used only when necessary. Orr's Orchards will be using mating disruption on our entire 230 acres of peaches for the peach tree borer that has caused issues in past years.