

# Sustaining Farming on the Urban Fringe



Monthly Highlights from Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

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## Grower-Directed Research: A Case Study of the New Jersey Blueberry Industry

*Jack Rabin, Associate Director – Farm Programs*

**“Grower-directed”** means really listening. Linking farmers to Rutgers assures our research addresses farmers’ goals for profitable farming, reducing production and marketing risks, doing no harm to the Pine Barrens, and improving resources on which farmers depend. Grower-directed empowers farmers to ask great questions, decide how experiments are conducted, and how knowledge is shared. With encouragement from NJAES Director Mark Robson, blueberry growers joined Rutgers and USDA, conducting four 2007 meetings, and charting a common path for research priorities.

**Why blueberries—Why now?** Even with expanding profit and acres, growers feel they must remain on the cutting edge of yields, costs, quality, and sales due to competing regions. Growers want assurance researchers are on the edge with them. Growers support Rutgers NJAES P.E. Marucci Center, and want to make sure while their needs are met, they effectively advocate for Rutgers and the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service. Following are highlights of topics and steps we will implement together.

**Changing crop fertility.** Grower Bobby Galetta notes we need to “re-examine all blueberry growing; farming from the ground up.” Growers hear non-replicated observations, coffee house folklore, rumor, and product promises when what they want is research performing reliably under variable conditions. Growers like Rus Franceschini perform fertility tests; comparing products, formulations, and rates without benefit of researcher consultations. While yields rose in recent years, sometimes doubling to 8-9,000 lbs./acre, questions remain where advances will come from. In the longer term, yields should close on 15,000 lbs/acre. How do growers get to the next level?

**Group Decision.** A new era of fertility recommendations and timing for achieving high yields with environ-



mental safety are a priority and can occur by recruiting more research on performance and safety (contaminants) of fertilizers. NJAES Director Robson offered \$25,000 toward a team proposal addressing fertility and soil health.

**Food safety.** Microbiology safety, residues, 3<sup>rd</sup> party audits, Good Ag Practices (GAPs), and traceability concern farmers. Growers want to “own their GAPs” guidelines. Growers want Extension reaching out informally—and formally—to non-participating peers. They want blueberries associated with healthfulness, opposing GMO crop improvement, (Roundup® ready blueberry) and thus oppose the N. American Blueberry Council funding similar efforts.

**Group Decision.** Farm visits and communications should continue urging growers to use GAPs. Incorporating traceability from field to retailer to fork needs to be easier. Growers want pro-active extension; discussing risks when observed, raising topics at educational events, and urging all growers to address safety. Growers with crisis management and media events need training and they have been addressing this through their association.

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**Research Support.** The USDA Northwest Center for Small Fruits Research (NCSFR) in Corvallis does not serve eastern growers. This Center includes OR, ID, WA, and USDA. NCSFR includes conferences and web resources like the Northwest Berry and Grape Info Network, maintains Pest Alerts, Ask an Expert, and Discussion Groups open to OR, ID, WA and BC Canada growers and fruit workers. This effort presents a threat to eastern growers and scientists. Multi-state western legislator support, grants from a larger center, and linkage of researchers and growers diminishes support for eastern research.

**Group Decision.** Growers want to help. They look to Rutgers for guidance: who to reach, how and when to advocate, and what the message should include. USDA visits to the Center were successful. Growers will work with decision makers' year around. Growers will stay informed about proposed changes to USDA ARS, competition, and USDA funds.

**Labor and variety development.** Growers fear risks about access to labor, recruiting labor at competitive wages, and immigration violations. This is a national issue, increasing the pressure toward mechanization.

**Group Decision.** Extension helps growers know their costs of production and Rutgers produces wage impact analyses. But immigration is an issue best addressed by growers. Breeders Vorsa and Ehlenfelt made machine harvest one of their key breeding targets when reporting goals: improving pollination efficiency (increased self fertility) of current varieties; machine harvest for fresh market; increased fruit quality and nutrition; filling early and late maturity windows; and aphid resistance. Breeders need "on-farm" space for evaluating early selections. Their success depends on loyally cooperating growers.

**Blueberry diseases.** Anthracnose control remains unsatisfactory. There are "mini crop disasters" from control failures. Too many fungicides are applied too late. There is over use on varieties without increased efficacy. There are new growers and new acres on marginal soils, with varieties not optimum for those sites, leading to increased diseases, higher fungicide use, and potential misuse. Less informed growers' practices may threaten Jersey's industry.

**Group Decision.** One extension opportunity includes training pesticide suppliers. Another is outreaching effective labeled materials via the web. Needs for fungicide evaluation continue, particularly local systemic materials, and for growers to trust performing earlier control near bud break. Growers need confidence in control timing alternatives.

**Entomology/IPM.** Root grubs, Oriental beetle, nematodes—lesser known unidentified pests "unseen below the soil surface"—are emerging in importance and must be addressed as part of soil health. There is a strong need for monitoring, sampling and sharing IPM results to growers and researchers.

**Group Decision.** The NJ Blueberry Council will continue funding IPM delivery, supplies, and summer scouts. Rutgers recognizes this and will not weaken extension IPM delivery. Growers recognize the role grants play in supporting IPM advances and delivery.

**Summary.** An outcome of these engagements is openness and honesty between growers, extension, and research leaders. This activity increasing communication and responsiveness will continue, and can be implemented with other NJ grower groups.