EPISODE DATE: 7/20/12

EPISODE NAME: Army Worms and Other Field and Crop Issues in Vermont

Today on Across the Fence a preview of the annual UVM Extension crops and soil field day happening in a few weeks at Borderview Farm in Alburgh. And we're going to check in on the growing season to see how pastures and fields are faring under the hot summer sun. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I'm Judy Simpson. In New England it is said if you do not like the weather just wait a minute. The Vermont farmers got their first cut of hay in early due to unseasonable spring temperatures and now farm stands and farmer's markets are offering vegetables weeks ahead of schedule. It's been hot and dry which is good for some not so good for others. But wait I'm sure that's bound to change. Joining me now is Heather Darby an agronomist from UVM Extension. Heather’s been working nonstop all summer with farmers on everything from pests to seed rates to cover crops. Welcome, it's good to see you. We've heard of a lot of pests this season and especially armyworms--are they still a threat?

Heather.: Yes, we still get a few calls especially from the northeast kingdom. I think maybe their army worm infestation was a little bit later then the Champlain Valley but overall I think at least at this point we're in the clear.

Judy.: Any other early issues that have cropped up?

Heather.: Yes there's been all kinds of things I think the mild winter is especially not just here but across the country has led to some severe pest pressure. Cut worms a lot a leaf hoppers potato leaf hoppers impacting alfalfa as well as potatoes and about 200 other different types of crops so yes lots of insects out there.

Judy.: What are some of the other issues that you're hearing about from farmers?

Heather.: I think people are appreciating the really nice weather this season for the most part. Being able to get the work done out in the fields on schedule and for the most part a couple weeks early. I think people are happy about that but there still are a lot of issues coming in. Right now it's a little too dry some of the hay and pastures are not able to re-grow very well because we could use some rain.

Judy.: Is the early arrival of crops a good thing or is it also cause for concern?
Heather.: It definitely depends on the crops. Right now most of the corn crop is looking pretty good. We've had some nice Iowa light corn growing conditions. I've seen some corn even tasseling usually we hope the knee high corn by the 4th of July and we actually have corn that's flowering so a lot of farmers are happy about that but some crops of course like strawberries this year came and went really fast because it doesn't like the hot weather. So some good, some bad.

Judy.: Thanks for those updates. The UVM crops and soil team is getting ready for their annual showcase. Every crop that grows in Vermont and I bet a few you didn't know grow in the green mountains. The event is happening in a few weeks. Across the Fence’s Keith Silva has our story on this field day for farmers.

Every August, visitors show up in droves to the Borderview research farm in Alburgh. Some are on foot while others ride in style … either way … they’re all here to see how the University of Vermont Extension is growing.

Nat. Snd.

The UVM Extension Crop & Soils Field Day is an annual event where farmers, researchers and agricultural professionals gather to learn, to network and to have fun. There are over 2000 plots on display, everything from sunflowers and hops to flaxseed and corn.

Nat. Snd.

UVM Extension agronomist Heather Darby hosted the first field day here in 2005 and like a seed it’s grown.

Heather Darby//University of Vermont Extension: “I think there might have been twenty-five of us, you know, we were all standing around each other, talking about the research plots and I just starting thinking to myself I really want this field day to be like a farm progress show. From the field days you can see that people want to learn they want to see it in action, they want to see it live in the summertime. They don’t want to hear about it this winter. And every year I think O.K. what’s that next thing that were going to do in some ways to really wow people to really get their attention and get them thinking about, oh, I could do that or maybe that’s something I want to try.”

The increasing interest in local craft-brewed beer has Alden Harwood thinking about growing hops on his farm in Addison.

Alden Harwood// Harwood Farm – Addison, VT: “Looks like a pretty good return on investment. I like beer too, so I’ve got an ulterior motive, I guess. [laughs] I’ve never been big on niche markets, but I don’t really consider hops to be a niche market. I think it’s more of the local movement and the bigger breweries, they’re not interested in the people around here, but the smaller brewers are saying, ‘yeah, you bring me something if I like it, I’ll buy it right off the back of you truck. I see the whole local food movement as really taking off.’

Christian Stanley traveled all the way from Massachusetts to take part in this one-of-a-kind occasion.
Christian Stanly//Hadley, MA: “I would say the UVM programs that they put on are, you know, the best around New England because no other state is committed to, at least that I know of, I mean they might have things in Maine, but at least in Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, Connecticut. UVM is the exception. They can share knowledge between farmers, they have an active Ag. Extension program that is really reaching out to people and really creating a community where they can share information, share knowledge and also do research so that you can be directed in the right direction instead of going down a path where you’re just not going to be successful, you know, really helping people be successful.”

Experiments at Borderview Farm to grow wheat and rye have helped small grain growers like David Kenyon of the Nitty Gritty Grain Company establish a new industry in Vermont’s working landscape.

David Kenyon//Nitty Gritty Grain Company: “It’s a great benefit for us to have the Extension because we can go right to them otherwise, I mean, we have nobody to call. We’re not going to call up somebody in the mid-west and say, ‘hey I have 150 acres of wheat’ and they laugh at you, but I mean it’s also problems specific to this area and they can’t offer their expertise from there. We need somebody with the local knowledge.”

Roger Rainville: “This is a real thing that’s going on.”

Roger Rainville is the farm’s owner … a long-time dairy farmer turned agricultural researcher. Rainville is committed to making sure that the research being done here makes a difference for farmers.

Roger Rainville//Borderview Farm, Alburgh: “One thing people need to know too is that nothing is done here unless farmers want it. I mean, this is something farmers have asked for and they want to see the results so that’s why we’ve put our best foot forward and tried to get them as accurate results as we can. This is real stuff there’s nothing more gratifying than that. It’s not about the money. It’s about wow, look at that farm they’re using that practice they learned from what we studied, that’s great, great.”

Hannah Harwood has been working all summer on seed oil trials. Her research is on how to best control pests and get the most out of these sunny and versatile crops.

Hannah Harwood//University of Vermont Extension: “We’re sort of trying to come up with a good system for growing a lot of oil seeds and on small scale we’ve got problems with bird damage and pests that sort of thing so we’re sort of fine tuning agronomic practices for those crops. Farmers can sort of get two bangs for their buck out of a harvest of oil seeds they can press the seeds for oil and then use the meal that left over as a bio-fuel or as a feed for livestock as a weed suppressant or an organic nitrogen supplement to their crops so we’re sort of figuring out all those, fine tune the details of how to grow it and what to use it for.”

Darby and the Northwest crops and soils team work on cutting edge agricultural practices … and use old-fashioned grass roots efforts to put what they learn to work for everyone.

Darby: “I feel like I’m meeting the needs and answering the questions of the farming community.”
And the farming community are dairy farmers, sheep farmers, goat farmers, vegetable farmers, grain growers, hop growers, meeting the needs of the end users people who are buying food that want to buy food, processing food and so it’s really about, you know addressing the needs of the Vermont community that’s what extension is all about.”

At Borderview Farm, growing and education go hand-in-hand … you could say it’s an ‘extension’ of the learning process. In Alburgh, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Thanks Keith. Joining us is Hannah Harwood. Hannah is a member of the UVM Crop and Soils team. Welcome. How are you going to top yourselves this year?

Hannah.: Heather?

Heather.: I don't know if we should tell everybody but we’ve definitely been thinking about it since last year. We have a new project this year where we are aerial-seeding cover crops. So we will have a helicopter seeding demonstration this year at the field day. I don't know what we're going to do next year, but that's what we're going to do this year.

Judy.: Hannah we saw in the video that your research is on oil seed crops. What's the latest with the research?

Hannah.: This summer we actually have an entomologist in residence on our team. It's really exciting we've been able to work on some of the pest issues that farmers are having. We have some traps up across the state for banded sunflower moth and the idea is to figure out exactly when they are arriving and what kind of impact they are having on the yields and quality. So we're excited to be branching out into some of the pest issues that growers are facing.

Judy.: So besides some flowers what are some of the other oilseed crops that farmers are growing?

Hannah.: We have a winter canola which is a new crop to Vermont and a couple of folks growing soybeans for oil as well. But winter canola is the next big thing.

Judy.: Why is it called winter canola?

Hannah.: It's planted in late summer or early fall and harvested the next year so it over winters.

Judy.: Oh OK. You have been with the team a little over a year; what have you learned?

Hannah.: That's hard. I do feel like I learn something new every day whether it's from the team or from farmers. We’re out in the field doing so many different things and working with so many different crops and different people that we're on our toes and learning every day.

Judy.: That's good.

Hannah.: Yes.
Judy.: Heather do you think this annual event as the farm progress show and where do you think farmers are headed next there always seems to be something new and interesting?

Heather.: Something yes. I remember when I first started my job almost 10 years ago thinking I wanted UVM Extension to be the leading Extension service in the northeast providing the best and most relevant information to farmers and I feel that's what this field day highlights. It highlights the best information that the farmers need that to continue to be viable and environmentally sustainable as well. It is the progress days.

Judy.: Why do you think it's so important to bring farmers to a field or to a farm as opposed to just sitting in a room?

Heather.: In a classroom? Well you have if you haven't noticed most farmers are farmers us for various reasons but most of them really like to be outside and they like to see things. They learn very visually and I wouldn't say the best way to learn is sitting in a classroom. Bringing farmers out to the field is sort of seeing is believing the type of educational format I guess I think it helps farmers understand also what we do every day when we're not visiting them. That we're not sitting in our offices and we're out there generating new information that they've requested from us. Questions that they're asking us and we're trying to answer.

Judy.: Tell me about the hops project because that's pretty unique.

Heather.: In 2009 we started with a hops project with some other states essentially Washington Colorado and Michigan. We planted about a one acre hop yard in 2010 some now are going into our second year of harvest. That's the only research hop yard right now in New England. So it's very unique in that way because we're generating very novel research further north east and finding out a lot of interesting facts about growing hops. So it is very unique to this area.

Judy.: There is an interest from some local farmers we saw on the tape about doing this?

Heather.: Yes and interest is growing. I think there's been a lot of small scale hop production. Very small and now that's expanding to increased acreage at this point. We do hear a lot from farmers that the reason they're taking that leap is because UVM Extension has been able to provide a network to them of other farmers and growers but also the information that they need.

Judy.: So they don't waste a lot of time and money.

Heather.: They have support now they have people to call what's this pest? Why is this hop plant not growing? So they feel more confident that they can be successful.

Judy.: Which is really important.

Heather.: Yes.

Judy.: Anything surprise you that farmers ask about when it comes to crops?

Heather.: No! Some days we sit in the office and say you're not going to believe the question we got today but I think we treat every question very seriously and I think our goal is to actively
listen. It's very important to us to generate the research to answer the questions that we don't have answers to.

Judy.: I want to thank you both for joining me today. The UVM crops and soil field day is on August 9 from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Organizers ask that you register ahead of time so please call the Saint Albans Extension Office at (802) 524-6501 to register. That's our program for today, I'm Judy Simpson. We will see you again next time on *Across the Fence*.

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