

## ***The Rule, The Rain, The Research***

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***Washington Tilth***

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By now I should know June will be wet. I warn our employees, I steel myself, but somehow you never really can be ready for 2 months of rain with few enough days of sunshine to get some seeds in the ground and then wait for poor germination, weeds, slugs and mud to make nice stands wishful thinking. Oh well, I know the sun will come out sometime in July. Can the berries wait? We'll see.

The time for comments on the Organic Rule has passed; now we wait and see how 10 plus years of work will play out. I personally am quite concerned that rules regulating raw manure are going to bite us, and, depending what they require for record keeping, direct market growers will have some changes and challenges to contend with. As you gear up for your markets, develop a record keeping system you can work with and stick to it. It will make your life much easier when you fill out your certification paperwork next year.

In the last issue I mentioned that I wanted to start a dialogue with our growers about funding research. I hope many of you are on the mailing list for the California based Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF). They have been committed to identifying research priorities, developing funding mechanisms and providing limited funds to farmers and researchers all over the US and into Canada to fund projects that will provide the most benefits to organic farmers. The Washington State Commission on Pesticide Registration also has funds available under their new mandate to provide funding support for projects that reduce pesticide use. These are two resources available to us that have developed to fund organic farming research. It's not very much. In the past couple of years, researchers have been coming to us for letters of endorsement to fund their projects with these two organizations. This is a requirement and has served the purpose of educating me to what most other agriculture organizations do to develop research priorities and funding mechanisms. We are definitely slow to get on the ball, and if we want to see WSU initiate more research to help us solve agronomic and marketing problems, we need to initiate a more ambitious effort to raise money internally.

One assumption I would like to address is the myth that Corporations fund all the research . My research shows clearly that research funds are greatly generated through the various crop commissions and associations. As an example, let's look at strawberries. The production average for the first half of the 1990's shows annual gross sales of over \$5 million dollars. Many years ago, organic ag was at that level of sales. The strawberry commission collected over \$27,000 for research from their growers. And most important, the research that came out of this addressed the priorities of those growers for variety development, and of course insect and disease control.

We need to develop some kind of funding mechanism so we can help ourselves. Obviously, with a mixed bunch like us, with many different crops and growing climates, our research needs are as diverse as we ourselves are. I have recently been asked to join the Board of Directors of the Northwest Agriculture Research Foundation (NARF) and will have the opportunity to learn more about the types of fee structures that are being used in the different crop commissions and associations. This seems like a place to start the conversation. How much would you be willing to spend to develop a funding base for targeted research? If you are currently a member of one of the crop commissions in the state, it would be very useful to collect information about your

assessed fees, and how the commission uses them. So far organic growers have largely been unsuccessful in pressuring crop commissions to spend these assessed fees in such a way that benefits organic farmers. I am hopeful that over time, as organic agriculture continues to occupy a bigger part of the total food picture, we will be more successful at changing this situation.

The problems associated with this research funding issue started coming to surface this past winter at the second listening session held for researchers and farmers at the WSU Puyallup Research and Extension Center. Among the growers there, we found no support for trying to generate some basic funds for a pool for organic farming research. Many felt their operations couldn't justify any additional fees and admittedly, this caught me by surprise. If all the organic raspberry growers chipped in with \$25-50 each, this would generate \$2-4000 which would certainly be sufficient to use to leverage with other monies to fund research to look at a production problem probably encountered by many. I certainly recognize that many growers operate close to the edge, but this response of no more fees and an unwillingness to step to the plate to fund research seems to me a somewhat inappropriate and naïve response. And, I have to say, one that isn't found with the other ag associations.

So this is a long winded way of saying, hey folks, we need to step up to the plate. Both the researchers that want to work with us, and the University administrators that we have been working with want us to realize that if we want to be treated like other ag organizations, we are going to need to start functioning in a manner more consistent with these other organizations in terms of revenue generation for research.

What do you think of this? This is a perfect opportunity to call me or write a letter to the editor about this idea and what we might do to get this going. It seems we will need to develop different systems for fee structures and to start at least with a voluntary system. I would definitely like to hear from you on this so let it fly.

The other issue is research priorities. We have been collecting and collating information gathered at Tilth conferences and by the Washington State Farmers Market Association and the Washington Direct Marketing Association.

This is how the list played out:

Late Blight in potatoes  
rust fly in carrots  
Cabbage root maggot  
botrytis rot  
cucumber beetle  
flea beetle  
Scab in potatoes  
early blight  
Symphytan control  
pollinators  
Soil health  
avian habitat  
(to enhance wildlife and for pest control)  
Attracting beneficials  
multi cropping

What is missing? What else should be added? At the Listening Session, there was also considerable interest in research and assistance with marketing issues and public policy development. We are hopeful that the new Small Farm Program Director will be able to address these issues once they are in Puyallup and have had the opportunity to work with small farmers directly. So when the weather shuts you down or you have some time to contemplate how to invigorate our efforts and capability to generate funds for research, I invite you to contact me. My phone number is listed with the rest of board, my address is under Blue Heron Farm in the Directory in the NW (first) section.

I'm hoping you all have a good growing season with pleasant, eager customers who pay you

well!

Anne Schwartz,  
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