

Where Do We Go from Here?

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I work for Cornell Cooperative Extension in Washington County, New York, in commercial vegetable and field crops, and I will take back some of the things I learned at this conference. Farmers need to communicate more among themselves. There are a lot of different types of farmers here, and we need to keep learning what's going on around the neighborhood. We need to encourage farmers to do more experimenting and trying new things. We need to rely on farmers more for ideas and excitement and innovation. It's naïve to expect that a university can do all of these things.

Where I am, corn insects discourage a lot of organic farmers from growing sweet corn, but there seem to be a lot of methods available now — *Trichogramma* releases, the oil applicator for corn earworm, better timing of planting, and better timing for using Bt —and we should be able to encourage more farmers to try organic sweet corn. One of the things I've been pushing at home is soil health, and I need to emphasize plant health as well. During the growing season, I put out a newsletter with degree days, rainfall, and reports for crops and bugs. I need to incorporate lists of beneficials and what plants are associated with them. Maybe people will take a look and see that they have them right there on the farm. I have been noting when the first potato leafhoppers are found in my county, and now I'll start looking at the trees to see when they are there, and not just at alfalfa. I still need to teach a holistic approach to crop management and a holistic approach to pest control, not a recipe.

Our society is unique in that there are a lot of different banners being waved now. Farmers from all these different groups need to talk with each other more.

How can I take what I've learned here this weekend and promote it and make it work at home? I need to look not only at farming as a holistic system but time management as a holistic system so that what I'm spending time on is focused. There are a lot of meetings already, and I need to figure out how to incorporate more of these ideas in the meetings we already have, instead of organizing more meetings. These are some of the issues that have come to my mind, and I want to thank those groups that have made it possible.

Elizabeth Henderson

*Peacework Farm
Newark, New York*

Going back to a few things that Eliot Coleman said, that pests are our professors...after this weekend, it's clear that we still have a long way to go to maximize plant and farm health. They are very much connected. As organic farmers, we have known for a long time that we are on to something, but we need to learn how to replicate the best conditions that we create on our farms. There's always going to be weird weather, and it's only going to get weirder, but we need to know what are the best soil treatments and rotations and what we can do to improve the health of the people who are eating our crops. A lot of the comments that were made suggested that less is often more: the less control

on flea beetles on potatoes, the more yield you get; less tillage, with no-till or conservation tillage, is good. Mike Hoffmann and David Stanley pointed out that we need to preserve the predators we already have by not trying so hard to kill off all the pests.

With flea beetles, we still have a long way to go. We're getting closer to where we need to go on cucurbits. Eero has found a great way to market our pests by selling the parts of the plants they live on. Brian is going somewhere with his cotton row covers. Solanaceae: whatever is going on seems to be working to cut down on pests. This is the right direction, to figure out how to control them without spraying anything on them. This conference is really the direction that we should go in. Together, we need a lot more attention on soil quality and the quality of the crops we are producing. We also need to go further in publicizing what we do and more information on the economic action levels of organic growers.

Bill Duesing

*Old Solar Farm
Oxford, Connecticut*

It was nice to start off with Eliot, who recounted the reasons that convinced us decades ago that organic growing is the right way to go, and it's good to see that the evidence keeps accumulating. Over and over again, it's been clear that we should leave things alone as much as we can—benign neglect. At the same time, we have to pay careful attention and observe what's going on.

Over time, any ecosystem evolves in four directions: toward greater diversity (which can help to control insects), greater organic matter (the secret of healthy soil), greater structural complexity (more things interacting in more different ways), greater metabolic stability (what we want on our farm so that things aren't easy to change). The soil ecosystem is as complex, important, and unknown as a rainforest. It really makes sense not to disturb the soil ecosystem. We need to figure out how to limit our use of cultivation tools. Since farms are ecosystems that evolve over time, it gets to the point where you don't need pesticides any more. Nature is go-

ing to win, and it makes sense to hook on to that and use her power as opposed to fighting it by plowing and rototilling and limiting the crops we plant.

I don't think I would ever try to farm without livestock. Over and over, I heard of pest problems and I thought that if there were some chickens in that field, that pest problem might disappear. Last year, I had a stand of buckwheat, and there were a lot of insects feeding on it, some of which must have been beneficial. There's a lot more to learn about the use of cover crops. The use of fungicide seems to have inhibited the use of fungal diseases to control insects.

We certainly have some challenges; there are a lot of unknowns. It's such an enormous world, and we need to figure more out. Timing becomes important, especially when we look at issues of weather. Often, you hear people say that they can't do what makes sense ecologically or agronomically because they need to make a living farming. It doesn't make a lot of sense for all these people to keep farming with the system so messed up.

Eero Ruuttila: We should broaden the community of communication so that we can exchange knowledge and techniques with farmers in Europe and around the world.

Elizabeth Henderson: At the IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements) meeting in Argentina, we shared discoveries made all over the world, and having more opportunities to make contact with people all over the world will help. There is an organization called "FISHNET" that is setting up a website for farmers around the world. [Editor's note: Elizabeth sent me contact information after the conference. The website is at: < [HTTP://WWW.LEIBL.DE/FISHNET](http://www.leibl.de/fishnet) >]

Audience: Is a website the best way to reach farmers?

Audience: A third of the farmers I'm in contact with are web-capable, but they won't go near it during the growing season because they don't want to get sucked in.

Audience: It is in the public library, so if there's a question you want to research, you could go there.

Elizabeth Henderson: NOFA also has resources in its newsletter.

Audience: I feel like I missed a lot by having to choose between two or three workshops at a time. I almost think it would be better to have fewer topics and larger groups to stimulate conversation. I think many of us got as much from one-on-one discussions as from large groups.

Myra Bonbage-Hale: I got so much out of this, and I can't wait to share once I got back home. I hope

we have more of these conferences, because there are many people back home in West Virginia (soil scientists, etc.) who could benefit. Maybe we should do some farther south. Maybe you could also make tapes of the sessions so I could buy the ones I missed.

Audience: I also think that we should have these regionally. There are some problems peculiar to the mid-Atlantic region, and we could benefit by having a conference.