Summer 2014
No. 37

Northeast Buckwheat Growers Newsletter

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2014 Buckwheat sourcing

Demand for buckwheat continues to be higher than supply. In response the price paid to growers is up again. Birkett Mills' buckwheat contract prices is $28.50 per hundred pounds for conventional grain, with Certified Organic grain having a premium at $33.50.

The price is on a clean and dry basis, with the adjustments for non-grain and excess moisture taken at the receiving house.

High corn prices are a direct challenge to planting buckwheat acres all over the world. Production in Inner Mongolia, recently over 1 million acres, is declining as the Chinese government encourages raising corn for livestock feed. There is a regional price difference, with the local Chinese price for dehulled buckwheat being $500 to $600 per metric ton or about $25 per 100 lb.

Eastern Canada is also an important region for Birkett Mills. In Berwick, Ontario, Homestead Mills has long been an agent for growers in eastern Ontario. This year the mill has also contracted with Elevateur Rive-Sud in Contrecoeur to deliver buckwheat from about 500 acres southern Quebec.

To the west, a longtime Midwest supplier, Ron Christensen of Battle Lake, Minn. was covered in the Penn Yan newspaper when he visited Birkett Mills this year. His family has produced hundreds of acres of buckwheat each year for decades.

2014 Buckwheat Field Day

The 2014 buckwheat field day at Edgewood Farms in Groveland, NY. Host Craig Phelps farms in the Genesee Valley south of Rochester. It is a highly diversified farm with vegetables, field crops and livestock. He plants buckwheat after green peas. That historically common rotation takes advantage of complementary features of the two crops.

The field day will be on Wednesday, August 27 from 1 to 3:30 pm. The location of the field day is near Geneseo, NY.
For directions, see page 3.

Phelps has been working on reducing tillage, and trying to calibrate how far it can be reduced for buckwheat in his rotation. Buckwheat can be valuable for loosening soil to make no-tilling the next crop better. But with direct no-till, the soil is often too hard for buckwheat roots to penetrate.

Production notes

Butler County in Western Pennsylvania was known as "Buckwheat County." There is still a mill processing buckwheat in Butler County, Zanella Milling, but they are not purchasing grain from County growers. Owner John Zanella finds that he must go further afield to get the quality he needs. He attributes the problem to the historic practice of waiting until frost to harvest. While the frost removes the leaves to make direct combine in easier, waiting that long also results in grain with small stones and other contaminants that are difficult to separate from the grain.

The art of harvesting quality buckwheat really can make a difference between having a good local market and none at all.

- Direct combining after the first frost is easily the riskiest. First, it only works if the frost happens just as the grain is ripe. If the frost comes too late, much of the grain will fall off the plant and never make it into the combine. Second, if the ground is wet when the frost hits, the grower has the painful choice of rutting up the field or letting the grain fall off. The frost will drop the grain nearly as well as it drops the leaves.
- Direct combining when the grain is mature takes close attention and patience. The grower needs to keep a close eye on the ripening progress by collecting grain, not relying on what the foliage looks like. With all the succulent plant material going through the combine, the ground speed needs to be slow to give the grain time to drop through the sieves and to avoid tangling.
- Swathing is the most forgiving, but also requires specialized equipment. The plants can be cut into a swath or windrow on a day when the ground is dry and the grain close to mature. Dedicated swathers can cover a lot of acres in a day. Harvesting requires pickup head on the combine, but it feeds the dried stalks into the machine quickly and the grain separates well.

Birkett Mills running despite Penn Yan storm damage

A thunderstorm that dropped several inches of rain on Penn Yan on May 14 caused extensive damage and flooding. The historic mill is located at the bottom of the hill, near the waterway that once supplied its power. The rush of water damaged the building and flooded the lower levels. The photo shows where the flood punched a hole in the boiler-room wall to get out of the building and into the stream.

Tremendous work by the Birkett Mills team got the building emptied of water and production restarted in three days.

The neighboring conference center, known as the Owl's Nest, had just been renovated. It was destroyed by the flood.

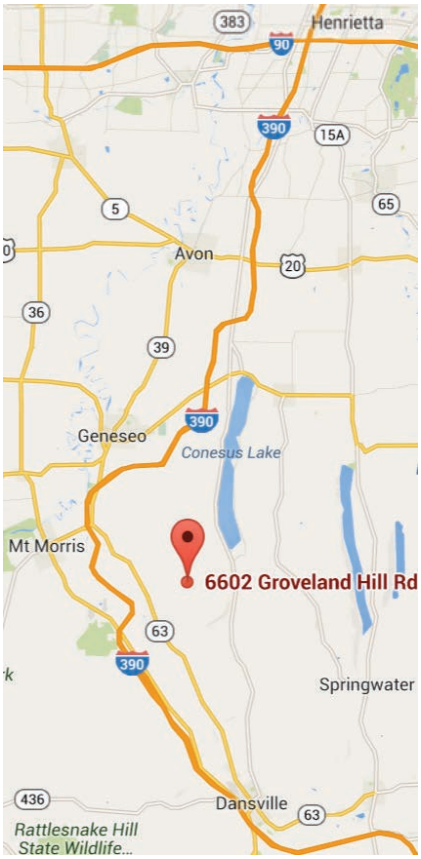
Deliveries of buckwheat to the mill this harvest will be normal.

2014 Field Day *(cont.)*

From most directions it will be easiest to take the Mount Morris exit from Interstate 390, and going south on Groveland Station Rd (NY 63), then up out of the valley on Bennett Hill Rd. The site will be behind the home at 6602 Groveland Hill Road, Groveland, NY 14462. Use that address for GPS, but go to Groveland Station before following the instructions, otherwise you might take a scenic but time-consuming route.

We will have the opportunity to see buckwheat planted after processing peas. One of the challenges with raising buckwheat after a legume is that there is a risk of excessive vegetative growth. Buckwheat can respond to the extra nitrogen fertility provided by the legume by putting on more leaves than are necessary, but also fewer seeds than a normal sized plant. In this field, that risk is managed by planting several weeks later than normal.

Our host, Craig Phelps, will tell us how significant buckwheat acreage fits in his large diversified farming operation.



Research note

This summer a researcher from France, Franck-Emmanuel Leprêtre is visiting the Björkman lab at Cornell to study some aspects of buckwheat pollination and seed set. First, he is making direct measurements of nectar production in Koto buckwheat during the day to test the (unlikely) claim that new buckwheat varieties don't make nectar. He will be comparing nectar production in Koto with the older variety Mancan. These results will help beekeepers narrowed down the causes of variation in buckwheat honey production.

LePrêtre's second experiment involves testing how much seed set is determined by photosynthesis that various critical stages of development. In apples, the "June drop" of fruit happens just as the rapidly enlarging apples require more sugar than the leaves can supply. Buckwheat may have a similar mechanism for adjusting the crop load.

Leprêtre's home base in the research station in Rennes, Brittany, where the French national agricultural agency studies buckwheat. Brittany is the part of France where most buckwheat is raised, and it is used to make the thin pancake called a galette.

One of the advantages of Koto buckwheat is that it produces large lower leaves. These large leaves are useful for shading out weeds, and they also provide more early growth. Since buckwheat only grows for four weeks before flowering, it is important that the vegetative growth is rapid. Because they are effectively "compound interest," highly productive early leaves pay off handsomely in more power to fill seeds.

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Buckwheat festival in Québec

Another buckwheat festival, this one focused on the crepe-like *galette de sarrasin* will be held this October 3-12 in Louiseville, Québec. Buckwheat was brought to Québec by the original settlers from Brittany, so it has a long history there. This festival has been held since 1978. For more information see their website at *www.festivalsarrasin.com*

About the Northeast Buckwheat Growers Association

The NBGA is made up of about 150 buckwheat growers in the Northeast.

Membership may be obtained by contacting the editor and providing contact information (address, phone, email). There is currently no charge to join.

This semi-annual newsletter goes out to those who have signed up as members of NBGA. The printed version is sent to members in the Northeast, and electronic version elsewhere. The complete member list is distributed to members each fall.

The Northeast Buckwheat Growers Association has been on the World Wide Web since 1998. An on-line Buckwheat Production Guide for the Northeast and back issues of this newsletter are available there.

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