

NYBGA AND NYFVI TEAM UP TO PROMOTE BERRY PRODUCTION EFFICIENCY IN NEW YORK

A two year project submitted by the New York Berry Growers Association (NYBGA), in conjunction with the Cornell Small Fruit Program Work Team, has been funded by the New York Farm Viability Institute (NYFVI). The purpose of this project is to establish a presence in New York State of two people to facilitate the demonstration and implementation of technologies that will improve the production efficiency of practices involved in producing high quality berry fruit.

The Board of Directors of the NYBGA, together with selected members of the Fruit Program Work Team, will serve as the advisory board for the project.

Members of the NYBGA Board of Directors have agreed to cooperate in demonstrations and applied research on their farms, and host on-farm meetings. In addition to the direct involvement of berry growers, information will be disseminated through printed and electronic mediums, twilight meetings, field days, and in-depth conferences.

NYBGA will help design the tools to evaluate the project, identify willing participants for more in-depth evaluations, and be directly involved in project assessment.

Who Can Participate?

The project will be accessible to all commercial berry growers, regardless of scale, method of production, location within the state, or enrollment in a county organization. The goal is to have 75 farmers increase production efficiency by 10% as a result of this project.

Berry Extension Support Specialists

The two new people, hired as berry extension support specialists (ESS) will work directly with faculty/staff to develop approaches, disseminate information, conduct on-farm demonstrations, make farm visits, organize small group meetings, write newsletter articles, record phone messages, and update web sites.

ESS will serve as a resource for berry growers throughout the state of New York, and be unencumbered by county or regional boundaries, or enrollment in extension. They will work with counties with limited small fruit extension support as well as with regional fruit teams to assist berry growers throughout the state improve production efficiency. One ESS will cover western New York counties; the other counties in eastern New York (Figure 1).

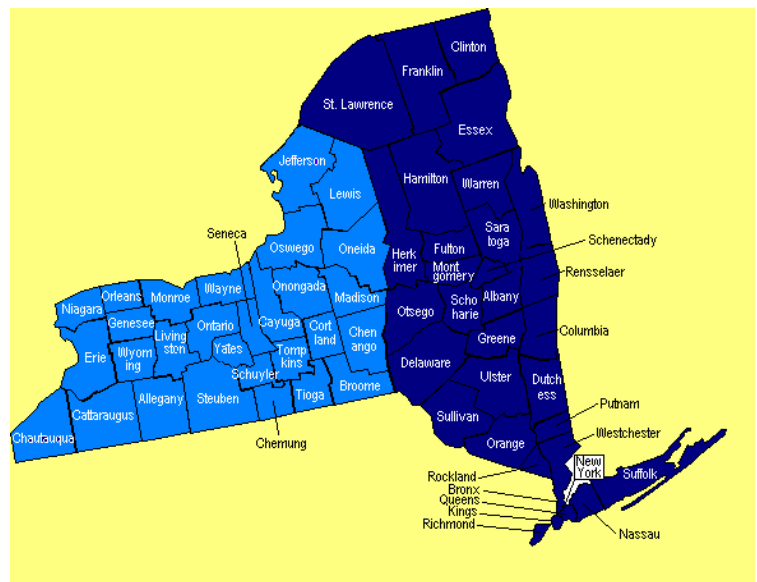


Figure 1: Coverage map for the new eastern and western New York State berry extension support specialists.

Dr. Pritts in the Department of Horticulture, Ithaca, will be the direct supervisor for the 2 new positions.

Project Background and Scope

Cornell has limited personnel resources allocated to berry crops, and few county extension systems have berry expertise. Although various parts of programs and resources exist that can contribute to meeting growers needs, we currently lack a mechanism for integrating and facilitating the delivery of critical information to growers in every corner of the state.

This proposal focuses on employing two individuals to demonstrate and integrate information on production practices, weed control, and pest management and make it available to berry growers throughout New York State. The primary sites for the work will be on active berry farms. The ESS will serve as resources for other aspects of berry production and be “on call” to assist with problem-solving in the field.

The berry industry has many opportunities for expansion and market development as determined from grower surveys and other sources. A major limitation for growers, however, is production efficiency as costs continue to increase and labor becomes scarce.

Weed management is perhaps the single largest contributor to the labor requirement of berry growers. Practices that reduce weed pressure have the potential to significantly improve production efficiency. Preplant site history, in particular, affects subsequent weed pressure. Increasing knowledge of cover crop management in the years before planting, and proper selection of techniques for controlling specific weeds in established plantings can greatly reduce production costs in fruiting years. Therefore, greatly improved efficiency in weed management will be one focus of this project.

Improving marketable fruit is a second strategy to increase production efficiency. Providing easy-to-use tools for pest identification and management can contribute to improvements in yield. But even if a good management strategy is identified, it may not be effective if pesticide application equipment is not properly calibrated or spray patterns are less than optimal. A portion of this project will be devoted to educating growers about pest management and, in particular, working with them to modify their equipment to provide the best possible coverage for each berry crop and each control situation they encounter.

Effectively using labeled pesticides, testing promising alternatives to pesticides, and designing production systems that require less labor and other costly inputs are two related approaches that can significantly address this major barrier for berry growers.

Proposed Milestones and Activities

- I. Growers will be informally surveyed about their best practices for improving production efficiency. The most promising practices will be implemented in small on-farm trials and, if successful, shared with the berry industry state-wide. One article will be written in each monthly issue of New York Berry News related to this topic. This newsletter will be sent electronically to growers and also be accessible from the Cornell fruit web site. Growers (in each of the two years) will be invited to attend the NYBGA-sponsored statewide berry meeting in Syracuse to learn about approaches for improving production efficiency.
- II. Growers will be invited to attend educational activities or receive newsletters that teach them how to implement an intensive preplant program consisting of soil testing, cover crop rotations, timely cultivation, and if appropriate, herbicide applications to reduce subsequent weed pressure. In addition, training in proper weed identification and the selection of tools to manage particular weeds will be provided. Twilight meetings will be held to permit growers to observe and/or incorporate new cultivation tools, cultivation timing or methods to reduce weed pressure (e.g. mulches) in established plantings.
- III. Growers will be provided with new and/or improved tools for pest identification and with guidance on the selection of control measures for problem pests. On-farm demonstrations will be organized to showcase different nozzle configurations that contribute to better coverage and enhanced pest control. Assistance will be provided to growers in evaluating sprayers for proper calibration and existing coverage, and modifications made when necessary.

For more information

Please contact your local CCE office for more information and/or to register your small fruit or market garden operation to participate in this project.