

Weeds become alternative forages

by Troy Bishopp

WILLSBORO, NY — As pastures continue to dry up, alternative forages (previously called weeds) are filling in to supply cattle with nutritious feed; as long as cattle get the knowledge to eat them that is. Enter Kathy Voth, Colorado's nationally acclaimed author and teacher/trainer of how to turn cows into weed managers. "Thistles are as beautiful as roses," she proclaims.

To make believers out of graziers and their animals, the "make peace with weeds" gal teamed up with the UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture on a week-long training in support of their USDA-NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant. Her final training, near the shores of Lake Champlain was working with the Essex & Franklin County Soil and Water Conservation Districts and their sponsors at Shaun and Linda Gilliland's, Ben Wever Farm in Willsboro, NY.

Kathy opened the day by pointing out to the capacity crowd that we have been fighting the war on weeds for centuries believing we could win. She debunked the notions that weeds are bad and animals only eat certain forages (cows only eat grass and legumes for instance). "We have put ourselves in a box on our thinking but we must punch our way out of it," she emphasized. Her take home message to graziers was two-fold: Animals are really flexible on what they eat and weeds are really good forage.

She guided the audience through her seven-day cow training regime while highlighting animal behavior nuances and practical tips to harvest these



The new class of North Country weed managers

alternative forages. "We are creating a language," she said. "Cows can be as good as goats at browsing plus they stay in the fences." According to her cited resources, weeds like knapweed, thistles, nettles, milkweed, burdock, bedstraw and even multi-flora rose leaves are highly nutritious and add quality and quantity to pasture swards. "We just have to train cows that these new foods are good and let them choose right along with other pasture plants. Forcing them to eat weeds as the last resort in a pasture is a recipe for disaster on animal performance."

Chef Linda treated the group to a spectacular local lunch featuring their own hamburgers and potato salad,

pasta salad and tomato-zucchini tarts all made with vegetables from their neighbors at Juniper Hill Farm CSA.

After lunch Shaun talked about the history of the farm, their goals as a diversified operation and led the group through the grazing system for their 70 head beef cow herd. He then told of his experience in following Kathy's recipe with guidance from Essex Co. SWCD mentor, Tiffany Pinheiro to teach some of his cows to eat thistles, milkweed and multi-flora rose. At first glance, there didn't appear to be much impact, but upon further scrutiny many plants were bitten and leaves shredded off. Kathy commented, "It takes time for animals and people to learn the system but I can see progress. The neat thing

is seeing them teach their herd mates and offspring because learning from mom is the biggest influence."

John Bingham of Wild Orchard Farm in nearby Whallonsburg, NY, came to learn so he could teach his custom grazed dairy heifers to manage the forbs on his property. "I'm really interested in teaching more farmers about rotational grazing in the north country and using these diverse plant communities to build soil health and create more local food."

Josh and Sarah Vaillancourt from Woven Meadows Farm in Saranac, NY, shared their desire to use this venue to maximize pasture usage and take back some fallow land infested with bedstraw with animals instead of tillage. "We were fascinated by the animal behavior culture Kathy talked about and how she reminded us what we used to feed our animals like carrots, beets, steamed vegetables and other alternative forages not necessarily from the grain family." Organizer Tiffany Pinheiro commented on how this new aspect of training can be good for the animals, land, water and its stewards given the financial and environmental rewards. "We are committed to providing practical educational programs that bring farmers and consumers together to explore different options of doing business that enhance our natural resources. I know I'll never look at weeds (forages) the same way again," she said.

This event was sponsored by the Essex County and Franklin County Soil & Water Conservation Districts, America's Great Outdoors, Central NY RC&D Council, Northeast SARE, & the Adirondack North Country Association along with hosts, Shaun and Linda Gilliland.

To obtain the how to book or video on teaching cows to become weed managers, visit Kathy Voth's website at www.livestockforlandscapes.com.



Organizers — Essex Co. SWCD District Manager David Reckahn, Kathy Voth, Essex Co. SWCD Conservation Specialist, Tiffany Pinheiro, Franklin Co. SWCD Conservation Technician, Patricia LaValley