

Pasturing Sheep an Alternative To Burning Blueberry Lands

Tour of Brooklin Farm Part of MOFGA Series

By JAMES STRAUB

BROOKLIN—Blueberry growers looking for alternatives to burning and spraying their fields could find answers in a study being conducted at Stoneset Farm on River Road.

Kevin Poland and his daughter, Clara Poland, were planning a tour of the farm yesterday evening (Wednesday).

The tour was to be preceded by a potluck supper and followed by a discussion of their ongoing study of alternative ways of pruning blueberries.

The event was part of a series of Twilight Organic Farm Meetings hosted by Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA).

The farm tours will be held throughout the state all summer and into September.

The meetings are intended to bring farmers and gardeners together for an opportunity to learn new techniques and share ideas and information.

A MOFGA staff member attends each meeting.

Wednesday's discussion at Stoneset Farm focused on pasturing sheep on blueberry land as an alternative to burning.

The Polands are in the second year of a study sponsored by Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, a competitive grants program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The program is dedicated to research and education to help build the future viability of agriculture in the United States.

Clara Poland said she became interested in the research project when she was looking for different ways to control weeds on the 17 acres of blueberries at the farm.

She also wanted to control the amount of fertilizer used on the land because fertilizer

also makes the weeds grow.

She had heard of the possibility of placing sheep on blueberry land to reduce weeds, but she was unable to find anyone trying the concept.

Next, she turned to Roland Dupuis, a district conservationist with the Natural Resource Conservation District in Ellsworth.

Dupuis helped Poland receive the federal grant to study the feasibility of using sheep to control weeds, rather than burning or spraying blueberry land.

The Polands started their study last year on one acre of blueberry land by placing four sheep on the plot.

The sheep ate some weeds but ignored others, such as bunchberry.

"It was fine until the young blueberry growth came," Kevin Poland said. "When the blueberries came, there was nothing else they'd eat. We moved them quickly."

Continuing the experiment in another section of land, the Polands discovered that sheep would not eat second-year blueberry bushes, those that were not burned and grew over two seasons.

The Polands also observed a noticeable difference in the amount of weeds, especially grasses, in the portion of the field in which the sheep had grazed.

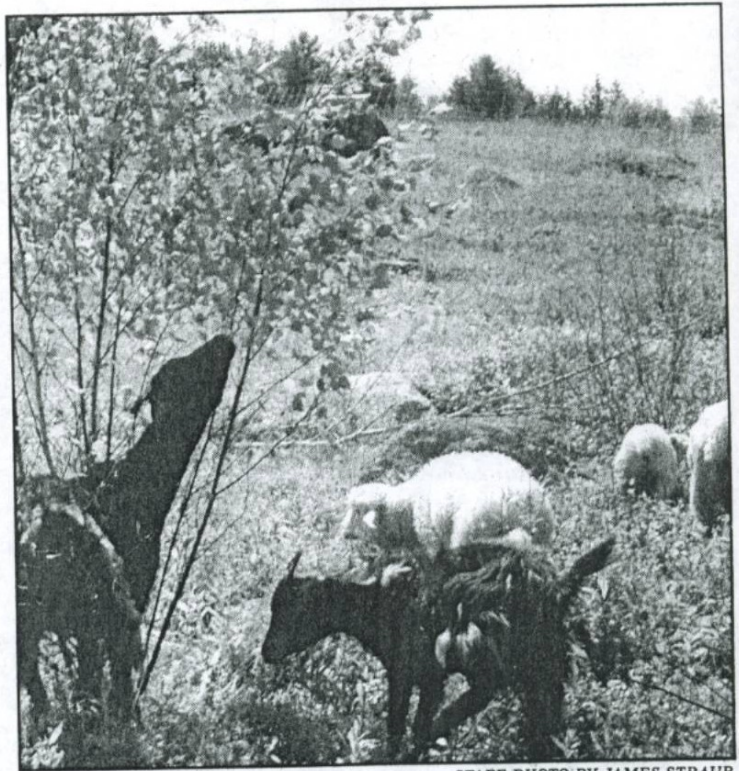
The encouragement led them to extend the study into a second year.

This spring they placed sheep and two goats in an area containing a second-year crop.

"We want to see if the sheep are mowers too," Clara Poland said.

She explained that some blueberry growers will mow fields every other year, rather than burning them.

Mowing, however, puts organic matter back into the soil



STAFF PHOTO BY JAMES STRAUB

This goat's appetite for woody plants pleases Kevin and Clara Poland. The Brooklin farmers are conducting a study on the feasibility of pasturing sheep and goats on blueberry land as an alternative to burning.

and nourishes unwanted weeds. imal manure on a harvest area within 90 days of harvest.

If the sheep or goats prune the second-year blueberries and consume unwanted grasses and weeds, it will have the same effect as mowing.

While the farmers would lose the organic cover resulting from mowing fields, they gain the organic nutrients in sheep manure.

"We want as much organic matter as possible," Clara Poland said, "as long as it's not weeds."

They will be unable to harvest the section involved with this year's experimentation because of federal standards that prohibit the introduction of animal manure on a harvest area within 90 days of harvest.

However, they plan to keep the sheep and goats on the second-year growth all season.

"If there are fewer weeds to be dealt with, then all the better," Kevin Poland said. With 14 sheep involved in this year's experiment, Clara Poland sees other possibilities, such as selling wool.

"We try to make the best use of our time and make the best use of the animals that are here, while still raising them humanely," she said. For information about Stoneset Farm or the sheep experiment, call 339-5513. jstraub@ellsworthamerican.com