NOFA-NY presents practical tools for small vegetable farms

by Jennifer Wagester

LIVONIA, NY — Rain clouds cleared just in time at Honeyhill Farm as 25 individuals arrived for a morning focused on small-scale vegetable farming. The participants represented all areas of the agricultural community, from farmers to college students and professors. Attendees came from as far as Buffalo, Watertown, and Utica. An RIT student was also on hand to capture the event on film.

Fred and Susan Forsburg, owners of Honeyhill Farm, welcomed the opportunity to share their farm with visitors. Fred and his wife purchased Honeyhill in 1978 and had always planned to farm the land. But while Fred worked as an engineer, he had little time for more than a large garden. In 2002, his employer's downsizing gave him the opportunity to make farming his way of life.

Honeyhill Farm produces organic pasture raised chickens, grass-fed beef, garlic, heirloom tomatoes, and a variety of other vegetables. The farm sells at farmers markets, a multi-farm Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) organization and local restaurants. They also sell and ship seed garlic throughout the United States. The farm is named for the hill on which it is located — Honeyhill.

As an engineer, Fred is always trying to find better ways to do things. The farm's main crop of garlic started as a very labor intensive crop.

Workshop participants take pictures and discuss the new garlic planting process.

Hand planting of garlic is necessary to ensure the garlic seed (a garlic clove) is placed "tip up" so that shoots easily grow up. Initially, every garlic clove was planted by bending down, placing the seed correctly into the soil, and then standing up to walk further down the row. This process is time consuming and strenuous to the body. It also takes the fun out of farming.

To make planting easier, Fred teamed up with Alfred University. The result is a 4 foot by 8 foot plywood platform suspended on a steel frame (basically a modified trailer) that allows a team of two people to plant directly into the soil from a comfortable position. A prototype was constructed in 2010 at a cost of $700 and immediately put into practice, which saved the farm about $700 in labor costs. An improved version incorporates gauge wheels to support height adjustment of the platform, places the wheels outside the platform space, and includes a tool bar to attach hilling discs or other equipment.

A demonstration of the latest design platform was provided. The platform was first attached to the farm's Tuff-bilt tractor, which offers a hydrostatic transmission. Low speed is essential as it permits planting at a comfortable pace and allows the operators to accurately place the cloves. Rectangular openings in the platform align with furrows in the soil bed that are established by the mid-mount furrowers on the tractor. The planters placed garlic cloves through the openings directly into the soil by hand. Their efforts created neat rows of evenly spaced garlic within a few minutes. Fred reported that he has increased planting speed by 6 to 7 times while maintaining accurate placement and avoiding the unpleasant ergonomics of the stoop and bend or drop and crawl methods previously employed.

After the demonstration, several participants took turns planting garlic from the platform, drawing much enthusiasm and encouragement from the crowd. While sharing Honeyhill Farm's experiences was the focus, Fred welcomed ideas and advice. Participants offered suggestions for ways to improve the design and discussed additional options that would make it more versatile. Fred's plans for using the platform for other related agricultural tasks were also presented and discussed in some length.

During the discussion, Fred shared how undiluted 10 percent (100 grain) white distilled vinegar has been an effective herbicide for broadleaf weeds in his garlic fields. Garlic is in the genus Allium. Their leaves have a waxy coating that protects the plant from the vinegar. Broadleaf weeds, however, are highly susceptible as the vinegar breaks down the cell membrane integrity of the plant causing plant tissue to deteriorate. Weeds treated with vinegar tend to yellow within four hours. Unfortunately, grasses are not affected by vinegar application.

At the close of the presentation, lunch was served as participants talked and shared their own farming experiences. Topics ranged from hops production and raising meat goats to challenges with small scale farming and labor concerns. Participants from universities were quizzed on their areas of expertise.

Farmer-to-farmer education is a core feature of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY). This year, 38 workshops were provided through NOFA-NY from June through October. A majority of them were hosted by farms, while others were held at field research or teaching facilities. Each year NOFA-NY asks its members if they would like to host a workshop on a topic of their interest. Many organic farmers welcome the opportunity to share their experiences and to gather ideas and insight from others in the agricultural community. The Practical Tools for Small Vegetable Farms workshop was funded by the USDA Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Farmer Grant program and co-sponsored by the Alfred State College Center for Organic and Sustainable Agriculture.

More information about NOFA-NY is available online at www.nofany.org. Honeyhill Farm can be found on Facebook or honeyhillorganicfarm.com.

Garlic planting at Honeyhill Farm is now faster and easier with new tools in place.

Photos by Jennifer Wagester

Attaching hilling discs (as held in Fred Forsburg's hand) or other equipment is possible with the new platform design.