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Northeast Buckwheat Field Day Gains Momentum in Fourth Year

by Linda McCandless and Cathy Weeden

Geneva, NY - More than 40 people attended Cornell University's Fourth Annual Buckwheat Field Day at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station (NYSAES) in Geneva, NY, on August 25, under cloudy but dry skies.

This year marked the release of 'Keukett', the first variety developed specifically for the Northeast. A product of the cooperative breeding program between Cornell and Kade Research in Manitoba, 'Keukett' is characterized by early plant growth with a marked change to seed production, which results in high yield and uniform seed maturity. New York varieties need to express this determinate growth habit because of the short growing season. In Manitoba, which has a longer growing season, buckwheat varieties have previously been selected so seeds are produced progressively, as they do on old-fashioned pole beans.

"Most of the participants were experienced growers," said organizer Thomas Björkman, of the Horticultural Sciences department in Geneva. Attendees came from buckwheat production areas in the Northeast, from as far away as Hamilton, Ontario, and Johnstown, PA. Because one of the program's goals is to put growers in contact with other growers, Björkman considers the strong participation a great success. "Discussion was very productive. The growers appreciated meeting each other and establishing new contacts," Björkman said. "About one-third to one-half were repeat visitors."

The main display was the field trials for the NYSAES buckwheat breeding program. Lisa Blanchard, of Björkman's NYSAES lab, has responsibility for the trials and for collecting the data to aid in the development of new varieties for the Northeast. This year, 25 breeding lines were tested at three locations that represented characteristic buckwheat-growing conditions in the Northeast. Good traits for Northeast buckwheat are: early leaf production, which enables the plant to complete the vegetative growth phase quickly and compete well with weeds; a high proportion of total energy spent on seed production; uniform seed development; and good milling quality.

Included in the day's events was a talk by Bill Pardee, of Cornell's Plant Breeding department. He described how a new variety goes through the seed certifying

process to ensure genetic purity and excellent seed quality. 'Keukett' is put through this rigorous process by the NYS Seed Improvement Project, which is run by Plant Breeding department.

Another highlight was a delicious custard-like dessert prepared by food developer Marcie VerPloeg on behalf of the National Buckwheat Institute. It was made with kasha and orange juice and topped with berries.

Buckwheat is used as a short-season cash crop. It fits a unique time slot in late summer growing: its 73-day season is from early July to mid-September, when fields might otherwise be idle; it grows on marginal soils; it requires no pesticides and little fertilizer; and it needs little attention in the growing season.

Historically, New York and Pennsylvania were the centers of buckwheat production in North America. Since the 1930s, the northern plains of the U.S. and Canada have become the major production regions. Buckwheat was first brought to North America in the 1600s by Dutch settlers, although researchers have recently determined that buckwheat was first domesticated in the upper Yangtze River Valley.

Locally-grown buckwheat seed is made into kasha, whereas most western-grown buckwheat is sent to Japan for soba, a traditional Japanese noodle. Despite the fondness with which many recall a hearty breakfast of buckwheat pancakes, the amount of buckwheat milled for pancake flour is relatively small.

Because of increasing cooperation among researchers, growers, and processors, the buckwheat industry is becoming more knowledgeable. Prospects are good for future economic stability. "The Buckwheat Field Day is an important part of this increasing communication," said Björkman.

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