

## Farmers urged to explore organic

By TIM PRATT  
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More than 100 farmers, researchers and students converged on the Penn State Fruit Research and Extension Center in Biglerville last week for a workshop on organic apple production.

Researchers at the extension center have been studying organic fruit for the past four years. The workshop gave researchers an opportunity to educate farmers and students on the pros and cons of switching to organic apple production.

"This is about teaching growers that it's possible in this area, and if they decide to transition their standard orchards to organic, then it is a possibility," said James Travis, extension fruit pathologist.

Organic fruit is exposed to a reduced amount of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers during production. But this leaves fruit more susceptible to insects and disease.

"If you are just learning how to implement organic practices, it would probably feel like more work because you are learning a new skill," said Heather House, director of educational outreach for the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture.

But organic fruit is not free of foreign substances altogether.

"You do use some chemicals in organic production, but they are organically approved," Travis said. "Those things tend not to last as long or they may be not as effective on some things, so you have to keep track and be careful how often you apply them."

Organic fruit production has soared in popularity on the West Coast in recent years and is starting to gain steam in the east, House said. She cited drier air on the West Coast as the reason organic fruit production is flourishing.

Travis said that even though organic fruit production might seem different compared to regular production, it is still possible to grow varieties of apples such as Red Delicious and Golden Delicious. But he acknowledged that organic production is not as easy as traditional farming.

"It's more difficult because we have less materials to use and, in general, they're not as effective," Travis said. "But on the other hand, I would also say that it is possible to grow organic apples in Pennsylvania."

Organic fruit production not only benefits consumers, who ingest less chemicals, but farmers as well, House said. According to Consumer Reports, the price of organic fruit is usually about 50 percent higher than standard produce.

"There's an economic incentive and there's a moral benefit," House said. "That's more money in the farmer's pocket."

The workshop was presented by the Penn State Fruit Research and Extension Center, Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture and Pennsylvania Certified Organic.

House and Travis agreed that the workshop, which is one of 26 weekly seminars planned throughout Pennsylvania, did a lot to educate the public about organic apple production.

"A lot of people think organic production is a philosophy and it's a bunch of hippies running around with their shirts off trying to catch bugs," House said. "But it's not. This center is working very hard to change that perception."

Contact Tim Pratt at  
[tpratt@eveningsun.com](mailto:tpratt@eveningsun.com).