

Farmers splash through rainy U. of Del. field day



A University of Delaware agronomist uses a grain drill and combine as an improvised stage to explain research and demonstration work to a crowd of rain-drenched farmers during the downpour at the recent field day.

NEWARK, Del. — They used to say, "It never rains for Field Day." But after 36 dry Farm and Home Field Days at the University of Delaware's experimental farm near Georgetown, they finally got a wet one.

Visiting farmers loved every drought-quenching drop of the near steady downpour that dumped a welcome 1.15 inches of rain on the August 12 festivities, however. After weeks of watching crops shrivel and dry in many downstate fields, no one was complaining.

Like field days at many other land grant colleges and agricultural experiment stations around the country, the Georgetown event usually features wagon and bus tours of research and Extension demonstration plots. These give farmers a chance to see what's being done to help solve some of the production problems with the crops they grow.

As the rain kept coming, sub-station director Ed Ralph and other field day planners had to make some quick logistical decisions, including where to feed the large crowd that normally

gathers for the traditional chicken dinner in the farm grove at noon.

By calling on the hospitality of the congregation of the small white-painted Asbury Methodist Church just down the road — which made their dining hall available — and by squeezing folks into every available bit of space at the sub-station office building, they managed to feed about 500 people in spite of the downpour.

Impromptu indoor seminars on crop production and soil fertility were held in the research farm's new 100'x40' equipment storage building instead of the scheduled field tours.

Inside the huge Butler building, resourceful planners backed a grain drill up against a big red combine and used this makeshift stage for easel talks on current research and Extension projects related to the production of corn, soybeans and small grains. Interested farmers and agribusiness representatives stood on the concrete floor below asking questions, while just beyond the open doorway, waiting wagons stood forgotten, their hay bale benches soaking up the rain.

There were a few general bus tours of the farm as the day progressed, as well as tours of the university's confinement swine production facilities, but most

information-sharing went on in that shed.

The consumer program—originally scheduled to be held under the trees in the farm grove, was shifted to the substation meeting room. There, visitors watched Extension home economists demonstrate creative ways to prepare squash and pork. A barbecued pork presentation became, instead, a session on "what to do when your picnic gets rained out" — still full of tasty, useful ideas.

For those visitors who did get out onto the farm, the most obvious differences to be seen were those between irrigated and non-irrigated plots.

"The Georgetown Substation is in one of the driest parts of the peninsula," says Ed Ralph. In the past few years, the section from Georgetown up to Seaford has suffered more than most other parts of the state, he says. The August 12 rain brought the first significant water some local farmers had seen since July 7.

"Because of the potential for drought, most research plots at the substation are irrigated each year. Even so, because of high temperatures, all plantings there were seriously affected this summer," says Ralph. Without irrigation he doubts there would be much data to be collected from trials at the research farm this year.

Field Day may not be the most convenient time to get an inch or so of rain, but when you're hurting for water, who minds some in convenience?

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