

# No-Till Vegetable Producer Becomes Lancaster's Outstanding Cooperator

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MOUNT JOY (Lancaster Co.)  
—No-till vegetable pioneer Steve Groff "doesn't do things by the book," according to Gerald Heistand of the Lancaster County Conservation District.

As a matter of fact, noted Heistand, Groff "tries things not found in books."

After graduation from high school 16 years ago, Groff, who farms with his father Elias and family in Holtwood, learned how important it was, for farm survivability, to keep precious topsoil on the farm. In 1983, he rented a no-till planter from the county conservation district.

Since then, he hasn't looked back.

He's taken his "new generation farming" philosophy a couple of steps further — using a no-till vegetable transplanter and highlighting all kinds of no-till techniques at a wide array of field days at his Cedar Meadow Farm.

For his work in showcasing no-till and underlining the importance of conservation for farms region-wide, Groff was awarded the 1998 Outstanding Cooperator Award at the 47th Annual Lancaster County Conservation District Dinner Meeting. The Thursday night meeting was attended by more than 250 at the Country Table Restaurant in Mount Joy.

Heistand, director of agricultur-

al operations for the district, narrated the story of Groff's no-till techniques at the vegetable and crop farms operated by the family in Martic Township. Heistand praised Groff's open-mindedness to new ideas and his willingness to experiment.

"If it's a new idea, it seems that Steve has tried it," Heistand said.

Moving to no-till cropping proved effective almost immediately in improving the soil. The Groffs added cover crops to further protect the soil.

Now, about 90 percent of the acreage is under cover crops — even the vegetable crops have a "living mulch" that conserves water, holds nutrients, and prevents soil erosion.

Some of the fields have not been touched by a plow for more than 15 years. Some fields have not been plowed for 30 years, because they were converted from pasture to cropland 10 years ago.

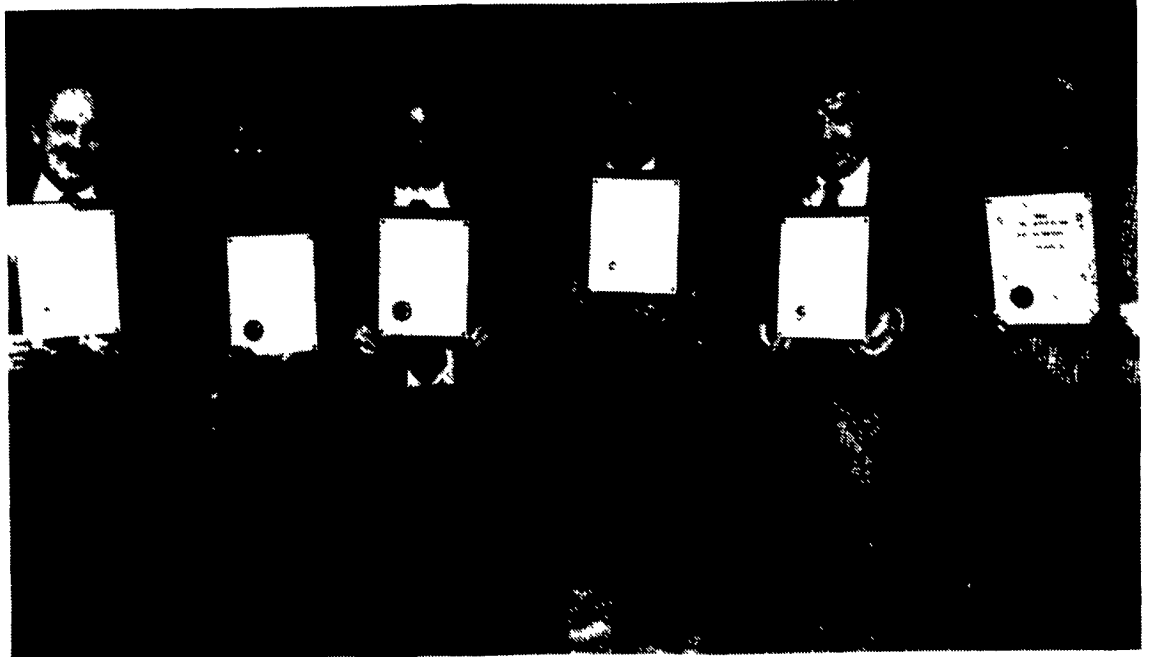
Over the 175 acres on two farms, pesticide savings alone have been phenomenal — 10 years ago the cost per acre for all pesticides ran to \$32 an acre. Now, 10 years later, costs have dropped to \$17 an acre.

The initial cost of cover crop seed and establishment is offset by the nitrogen contribution from legumes, soil held in place, and increased soil tilth, according to the district.

Steve Groff manages all field



The Outstanding Cooperator Awards went to the Groff family in Holtwood. From left, Steve and Cheri Groff and Marian and Elias Groff. Photo by Andy Andrews



Industry award winners at the Lancaster County Conservation Banquet, from left, Grant Smith of Derck and Edson Associates; Leanne Biers, Ephrata Borough; John Kibblehouse, Windsor Services Development Corp.; Harold Wiker, H.L. Wiker Excavating; L. Burnell Andrews, Andrews Excavating; and Darnell Hurst, Hurst Excavating.



Warner Lambert was recognized for its conservation efforts. From left, Cindy Brandt and Lynn Shafer.



Individual award winners recognized Thursday night were, from left, Arba Henry, long-time ag instructor at Solanco High School, Educator Award; Herb Myer, Service Award; Helen and Roy Rudy, Youth Conservation School; and Dr. Phil Ogline, retired ag instructor at Garden Spot High School, Educator Award.

and Elias, his father, is in charge of marketing the produce and hay. Crops include 60 acres of corn, 50 acres in alfalfa/grass, 30 acres in vegetables, 20 acres in soybeans, and 15 acres in small grains. Elias raises about 70 steers on his farm per year.

To provide the necessary nitrogen, Steve has been using hairy vetch as a cover crop. A rolling

stalk chopper rolls down the cover and vegetables are planted into the cover, "amidst a mat of residue," Heistand indicated. A no-till planter inserts different vegetable crops where planned.

The farm's techniques are so unique that a Public Broadcasting System TV documentary is under way. Farmers from as far away as Japan visit to see what the Groffs have been doing, Heistand noted. Hundreds of farmers have visited his various field days over the years, some covered extensively by this newspaper. And Steve maintains his own Internet website.

Also, the Lancaster County Conservation Expo is planned for July 29 at the Groff farm, according to Steve Groff.

"Steve's philosophy is that the soil is the lifeblood of the farm," said Heistand.

Ronald Meck of the district's board of directors said that Steve and Elias Groff are "men on a mission" to improve the condition of the soil.

In remarks to the guests, Steve said, "The soil is the most important asset we have under our control to manage," he noted, so that "my children and children of the future can make a good living from the soil."

Steve farms with his wife, Cheri, and their children Dana, 5,

Lauren, 4, and David, 1 along with Steve's father, Elias and his wife, Marian.

### Industry Awards

Also at the banquet, several industries were noted for their lasting contributions to soil conservation in the county.

Nevin Greiner, district resource conservationist, awarded the Conservation Award to the Building Industry to The Brickyard, a 65-acre tract in Ephrata Borough operated by Glen Gery Brick, which ceased operation in the late 1960s.

Eventually, the Windsor Development Corporation "acquired the vision to develop the property," noted Greiner. The borough worked with Windsor and agreed to a rezoning from industrial to high density and single family residential.

The complicated, steep property has more than 100 feet of elevation change in the tract. The slopes challenged the designer and excavator companies involved.

Through all phases of the project, according to the resource conservationist, a combination of erosion control matting and, to quote the contractor, "good weather" aided in the design of the slopes.

Some of the slope stabilization was performed by "creative and

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