

Field Day Proves 'Tree-Free' Paper Products Possible From Kenaf

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Lancaster Farming Staff
HOLTWOOD (Lancaster Co.)— Under a tent in the pouring rain recently, Mississippi State University Agronomist Brian Baldwin held up a packet of tissues with some Japanese writing intermixed with English. The English was clear: "We Love The Earth." Japanese writing indicated the product was made from kenaf.

Kenaf is a fiber crop and a renewable raw material that can be used in a variety of household products.

Its use is almost unparalleled in paper products.

Why is it so popular in Japan? Because, Baldwin said, a Japanese federal mandate dictates that 20 percent of all paper products in use must be "tree-free" by the year 2002.

Strict clean water standards require that paper production be less "dirty," Baldwin noted. With kenaf, there is little waste because the kenaf paper doesn't require bleaching.

Baldwin spoke at the 7th annual farm field day recently at the Steve Groff Family Cedar Meadow Farm near Holtwood.

One grade of kenaf (pronounced ka-NAF) produced from the long fibers in the bark

of the East Indian hibiscus plant is used to make pulp paper, used in newsprint (such as this newspaper). The whole stalk kenaf is used for pulp for newspapers — not the highest quality. The purest kenaf ("bast") goes into making book and letterhead-grade paper. Baldwin provided samples of Crane letterhead paper made with bast at the field day.

Some product (two-thirds, which is the core) goes into making fiberboard and other molded products, noted Baldwin.

But the Japanese use kenaf in fast food wraps — even coffee filters. "The Japanese are great at doing this," Baldwin said.

An economically viable crop, of which 15,000 acres are soon

going into full-scale production in South Carolina, a variety called Tainung II seems the most economically feasible, according to Baldwin. (That variety leaf also bears a resemblance to the Marijuana plant leaf.)

The seeds are supplied from Mexico and south Texas.

Baldwin works on a project, begun in 1989, on kenaf product development research. The project, which began with 3,000 acres, includes 1,000 acres in Mississippi (from a high of 6,000 acres in 1993, Baldwin noted). Interest in kenaf peaks when newsprint paper goes up — and kenaf producers can find markets.

The high-grade kenaf is used in letter quality paper. The paper is about 50 percent kenaf and 50 percent cotton — the

same combination used in making ball caps. One ball cap on display with kenaf was produced for the MSU Bulldogs. The cap was manufactured in the U.S. by Strohm Manufacturing, Clarksdale, Miss.

Other household products on display at the field day included burlap made in Guatemala; "Lizard Litter," for snakes, tortoises, and arachnids, made in Charleston, Miss.; "Delta Dri," small animal bedding, also made in Charleston, Miss.; and fiberboard with laminated wood layers. Ford uses kenaf in pressed car panels. Some kenaf is mixed with plastics or resin to be molded to any shape.

The kenaf-based newsprint is acid-free, so it won't yellow over time. Even with lower-grade

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Pulp paper can be manufactured from the shredded whole stalk of kenaf, shown here.

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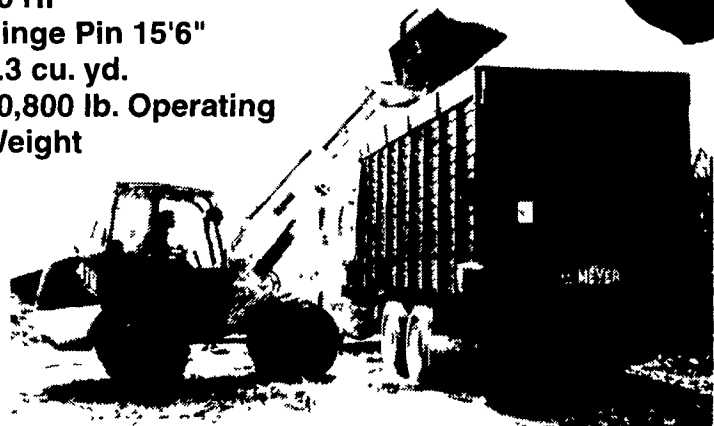
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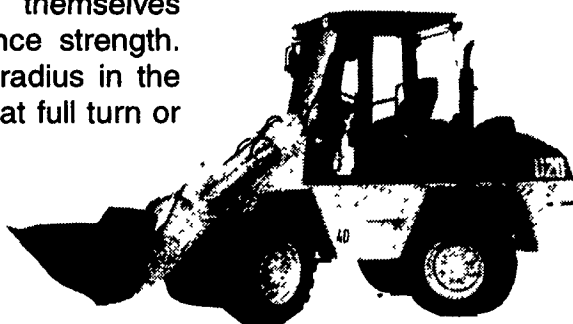
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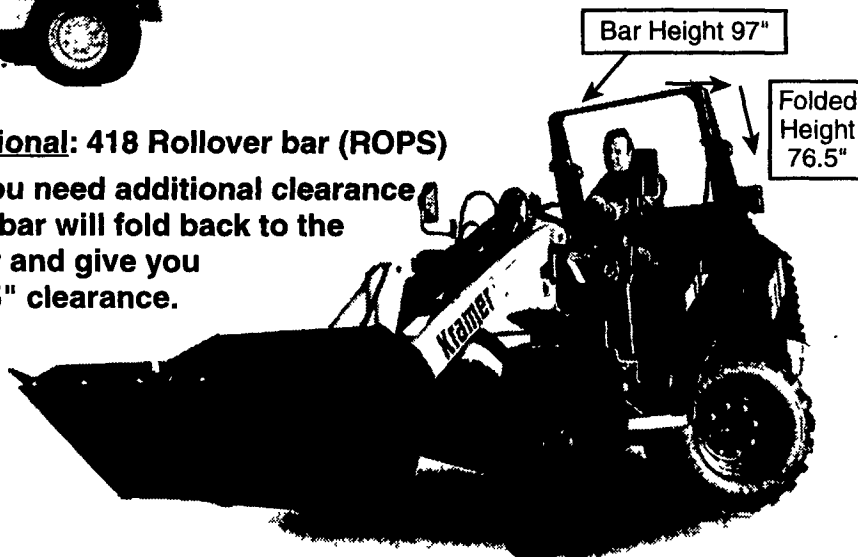
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