

Honoring Agricultural Practices in the Mad River Valley that Help the Land and the Farmer

This fall the Winooski Natural Resources Conservation District visited 2 established farms in the Mad River Valley that have been cover cropping for years and have successful stories to share as a result. David Hartshorn is a Waitsfield vegetable producer responsible for organic vegetable production on 20 acres along Rte 100. using only 1 ton of organic granular fertilizer annually, David relies on dehydrated manure for a dairy farm in East Montpelier, wood Ash from Ryegate and the “green stuff” – his plowed down cover crop, to supply his outstanding vegetable and fruit crops with all the nutrients they need. David grows some of the earliest tomatoes and sweet corn in the Valley thanks to his healthy soils! He attributes the health of his soils to the use of hairy vetch and annual winter rye as cover crops, applied to the land as soon as the commodity crop is harvested and picked for the season. He finds this cropping rotation to help with water retention, building of organic matter, and growing an enormous earthworm count in the soil.



Across the Mad River, Elwin Neill Jr. a 3rd generation dairy farmer feels cover cropping helps his soils, crops, and bottom line as well. Currently milking 80 cows with limited help on the family farm, Elwin is appreciative of this “cheap practice that protects both water quality and soil quality”. This past fall he broadcast winter rye seed and disc harrowed in the cover crop on 80 acres of field and sweet corn. This practice has helped keep his production costs low as well. Elwin was able to grow excellent feed for his herd without commercial fertilizer and only liming the soil, applying a fall manure application and incorporating the winter rye cover crop in the spring when it reaches 12” in height. In addition to economic and agronomic benefits, these farmers recognize the public relation benefits to this best land management practice.

Both farmers have received financial and technical support from the Winooski NRCDC since 2004. Since then, many comments have come in from community members and Rte 100b commuters alike about how green the fields of the Mad River Valley are in late fall and early spring. This season-extension cover crop can be found all throughout the Winooski watershed this year, thanks to a 319-grant from VT Department of Environmental Conservation and the VT Agency of Agriculture’s Farm Agronomic Practices Program.

Winter rye cover crop of vegetable field in Waitsfield, October 2009

These 2 farms will be honored at the Winooski NRCDC Annual Dinner on November 12th in Waterbury. To attend the annual dinner, read more about cover cropping practices in the Winooski watershed, and learn more about the activities of the Winooski NRCDC, visit their website at: www.vacd.org/winooski or call Abbey Willard @ 828-4493 x 110.



David Hartshorn sharing his cover cropping experience during the Winooski NRCDC farm tour