

# Farm rolls out welcome mat for insects

## Clay and Josie Erskine use habitat to support pollinators, other 'good' bugs

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE, Idaho — Clay and Josie Erskine have taken a dilapidated alfalfa field and, in five years, turned it into one of the area's most diversified organic operations.

One of the keys to their accomplishments at Peaceful Belly Farm has been incorporating a variety of habitats that provide food and shelter for pollinators and other beneficial insects.

That has included augmenting a riparian area with willow trees and other plants, planting native bunch grasses and clover on roads within the 60 acres and planting perennials in a hedgerow and brassicas for flowering.

They also leave a portion of some crops unharvested to support pollinators.

The result has been a proliferation of native pollinators that provide free services and beneficial insects that prey on crop pests, said Josie Erskine, 39.

"We had a really bad problem when we started farming

here with pests such as carrot rust fly and leaf miner," she said. "This year I haven't seen any signs of carrot rust fly and I've seen very little signs of leaf miner. It shows me that it's working."

Clay Erskine, 40, said their decision to make an effort to cultivate beneficial insects was a gut instinct that paid off.

"I just had an intuitive sense about it," he said. "Everything we can do to promote beneficial insects to take care of the bad bugs, and promote the native pollinators more, just makes sense for the benefit of our whole operation."

He said the difference from when the couple started farming here five years ago is significant.

"The abundance of different species we now have here is amazing (and) the bad bugs have gotten less and less," he said.

The Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides and the Xerces Society teamed up for a recent field day that highlighted what Peaceful Belly



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Clay and Josie Erskine stand with their 3-year-old daughter in front of habitat on their Peaceful Belly farm that is designed to feed and support pollinators and other beneficial insects. They say the beneficial insects have helped them turn what used to be a dilapidated alfalfa field into a thriving organic farm.

Farm has done to enhance pollinators and beneficial insects.

Jessa Kay Cruz, senior pollinator conservation specialist for Xerces, said she is impressed by what the Erskines are doing.

"(They're) taking a whole-farm approach to this," she said. "(They're) looking at what's happening both in (their) fields as well as what's happening on the perimeter of (their) farm."

She said while these prac-

tices were largely developed on small organic farms, larger conventional farms are incorporating them.

Nestled against the foothills in the Dry Creek Valley north of Boise, Peaceful Belly Farm produces 180 types of vegetables as well as herbs, flowers, berries and pasture-fed chickens. Clay Erskine estimates the farm also grows more than 2,200 varieties of vegetable seeds.

"It's pretty diverse on the

## Western Innovator Clay and Josie Erskine

Operation: Peaceful Belly Farm, 60-acre organic operation

Location: Dry Valley area north of Boise, Idaho

Family: Two daughters, 12 and 3

Education: Clay has a bachelor's degree in biology from Boise State University and Josie majored in music and theater at BSU

Born: Josie was born in Pocatello, Idaho; Clay in Glacier National Park, Mont.

Online: [http://www.xerces.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/nrcs-technote\\_plantsintermtnwest.pdf](http://www.xerces.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/nrcs-technote_plantsintermtnwest.pdf)

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# Researcher pioneers variable-rate fumigation

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

PARMA, Idaho — A researcher based in southwestern Idaho is pioneering the concept of variable-rate fumigation to control nematodes in multiple crops.

Unlike conventional techniques, in which entire fields are uniformly fumigated, variable-rate fumigation involves testing soil in 1- or 2-acre grids and then applying fumigants only where they're needed.

"That allows the grower to take out the hot spots and not overuse fumigants in a particular field," says Harry Kreeft, a nematologist and plant pathologist with Western Laboratories. "It just doesn't make sense to put a treatment on an area where you don't have a problem."

The concept involves treating each grid as an individual field, he says.

Several soil samples are taken within each grid and an analysis produces a map of nematode hot spots.

He likens the concept to removing a wart on your thumb.

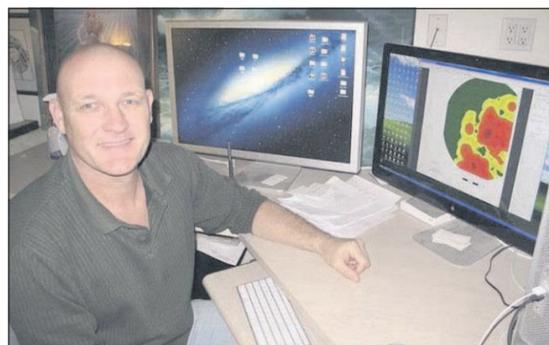
"You don't get chemotherapy; you just remove the wart," he says. "That's how you can look at variable-rate fumigation. You take out the hot spots, the cancers, in the field. You don't nuke the whole field."

Kreeft, 50, was born and educated in the Netherlands and moved to the United States in 1996 to attend the University of Idaho for two years. He went to work for Western Laboratories in 1998 and shortly after began pioneering the idea of applying fumigants in varying rates.

Kreeft says variable-rate fumigation is a growing trend and one of the driving factors is a shortage of Telone II, a soil fumigant used to control all major species of nematodes in vegetable, field and nursery crops, fruit and nut trees and grapes.

"There's just not enough to go around, so growers are looking for alternatives and the variable-rate idea just fits perfectly," he said.

Kreeft says the approach



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Harry Kreeft, a nematologist and plant pathologist, is shown at his workplace at Western Laboratories. He helped pioneer variable-rate fumigation.

often reduces fumigation by about 40 percent and as much as 75 percent in some fields. Fumigation costs about \$340 an acre.

"If you can save \$340 an acre on 75 percent of your field, that's a lot of money," he says. "That's a new pickup."

Kreeft is helping Western Laboratories perform site-spe-

cific management of nematodes for multiple crops — including potatoes, onions, hops, apple orchards and grapes — in Idaho, Colorado, Oregon and Washington.

Western Laboratories owner John Taberna, who hired Kreeft, said beneficial microorganisms are not as severely set back when variable-rate fumi-

gation is used.

"Their recovery rate is much faster with variable-rate than it is with a one-size-fits-all approach," he said.

Taberna said many farmers are still reluctant to try the variable-rate approach despite the cost savings.

"The farmers are so scared of sticking their neck out because they're so used to treating everything and the crop advisors are afraid to advise the farmers to do it, too, because their neck is stuck out also," he said.

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## Western Innovator Harry Kreeft

Position: Nematologist, plant pathologist with Western Laboratories

Age: 50

Born: The Netherlands

Professional: Master's degrees in nematology and plant pathology from Wageningen University, Netherlands

Family: Single, two adult children

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