

American Vegetable Grower

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Editorial By Richard Jones rljones@meistermedia.com

Burning Questions

WE get some pretty interesting correspondence from our readers each month. Much of it is positive, which is appreciated. Some is “constructive” feedback, and that’s good too. (One person took time to write a letter and let me know he didn’t like my column photo. I can’t get a new face, but I am considering a new picture to run on this page.)

Other folks contact us with follow-up questions about something they read in an issue, or just have a problem they’re hoping we can help with. This month, for example, we heard from a grower in Tennessee who was wondering about the legality of burning his used plastic mulch:

“I have just read about the meeting for Plasticulture in your Feb. issue. It seems to cover everything except how you get rid of the stuff when you clean up a field,” he wrote. “I would appreciate any info you could e-mail us.”

No Easy Answers

These are the kinds of reader questions I like, because they’re easy to answer. If we don’t already have the information at hand, I can usually track down a solution with a couple of quick phone calls.

But it soon became clear that this one was not going to have as simple an answer as I’d hoped. According to the grower’s county extension office, burning used ag plastics is illegal in Tennessee. The landfill is this grower’s only option. OK — not exactly what he was hoping to hear, but not totally unexpected either.

A call to the University of Tennessee was also discouraging. Not only do many of the state’s landfills charge extra to take mulch, some won’t accept ag plastic at all. Now I’m starting to share the reader’s frustration. Just how *are* you supposed to get rid of this stuff?

Dr. Michael Orzolek, director of Penn State University’s Center For Plasticulture, says it’s a situation

growers are facing in other areas of the country as well. Biodegradable materials are the ultimate answer, he says, but agrees they certainly aren’t the solution for a grower who’s got fields full of traditional plastic and nowhere to go.

Orzolek points out that the Center For Plasticulture has a solution in the works: a process that recycles old plastic into fuel pellets, which can be burned to supply heat for greenhouses, high tunnels, or other facilities. If all goes well, it could be commercially available by 2006. Read more about the program at plasticulture.cas.psu.edu/furnace.htm.

Do The Right Thing

But with widespread use of biodegradable mulch and that Penn State furnace still months or years from helping many of you out, what should you do?

First, speak out to the people that can actually do something to help: USDA, researchers, and the plastics industry. Remind everyone how important plastic mulch technology is for your high-value crops. Programs to eliminate the need to dispose of the plastic — increased biodegradable offerings and recycling programs — or that provide help in finding more environmentally friendly ways of disposing of the materials should be high on everyone’s to-do lists.

In the meantime, check the regulations in your area. If you’re not supposed to burn plastic, don’t. If you have to haul it to the dump and pay 40¢ a ton to get rid of it, so be it. In the end, it’s a cost of doing business.

And, please keep those letters, phone calls, and e-mails coming. We’re here to help, and we’ll try to have a more satisfying solution for your questions.

Richard Jones

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