

Farms fight unwanted crop

Workshop offers strategies to battle weeds thriving after rainy season.

By Dennis Pollock / The Fresno Bee

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The spring rains did not merely water the weeds in Frank Clarke's Woodlake olive orchard.

They also kept him from driving into the orchard to apply pre-emergent herbicides to keep more weeds from sprouting. The result: One of the worst weed seasons ever for Clarke.

"That's why I'm here," Clarke said as he rode a tram during a workshop on weed control Tuesday at the University of California's Kearney Research and Extension Center in Parlier. "I signed up as soon as I heard about it."

The workshop drew about 70 participants, some of them farmers like Clarke, as well as pest control advisers, chemical applicators and other professionals whose workday often involves weed control. "I found 14 different weeds I have to deal with, each of them requiring a different herbicide," Clarke said.

He praised the workshop because of its multiple presenters who tackled a range of topics and because of handouts that got down to the nitty-gritty of how best to zap weeds — most commonly with a chemical.

There also was a presentation on a nonchemical approach to weed control from Jim Stapleton, UC integrated pest management plant pathologist. He showed how solarization — using transparent plastic film over drip-soaked soil — can do many of the same things that toxic methyl bromide can do, and at significantly less cost.

"It's one of the benefits of living in this scorching Valley," said Richard Molinar, a UC farm adviser in Fresno County who works with growers operating smaller farms.

Behind him was a row of soil covered with plastic. A thermometer stuck through the plastic and into the soil showed a temperature of about 99 degrees at 10 a.m. The soil can reach temperatures as high as 140 degrees, essentially cooking weed seeds and some nematodes and killing them.

The solarization process has become especially popular with some organic growers who cannot use pesticides.

Among them is T & D Willey Farms in Madera, 13886 Road 20, where a free workshop on solarization will be presented from 8:30 until 11:30 a.m. Friday.

Whatever the method of weed removal, it's important to catch the weeds when they are small. Molinar rattled off the seed counts for some problem weeds — "lambquarter: 72,000 seeds from one plant; pigweed: 117,000 seeds per plant."

"The saying used to be 'one year of seeds, seven years of weeds,'" Molinar said. "Now, it's closer to decades of weeds."

Among the weeds increasingly plaguing Valley farmers is what is commonly called the horse weed or mare's tail, because of what it looks like.

Some of those weeds stood taller than Fresno County's UC adviser on weed control, Kurt Hembree.







"You need to do something about them when they're no taller than my socks," Hembree said.



Joan Stanton of Stratford, who lives on a farm, takes part in the identification session at a workshop on controlling pesky plants held at the University of California's Kearney Research and Extension Center in Parlier.

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But, he pointed out, horse weed and a cousin, hairy fleabane, appear to be developing resistance to glyphosate, which is Roundup and other products.

Hembree recommends using higher doses of the herbicide to control those pesky weeds, whose reach goes beyond the \

"We have a problem with mare's tail," said Richard Goldstone, superintendent of the wastewater treatment plant in Reer mosquito problem, too."

The weeds also can harbor farm pests such as aphids and the glassy-winged sharpshooter, which can spread deadly Pier through vineyards.

"Fleabane is the worst," said Paul Gill, who attended the workshop with his son, Gambur Gill. They farm in the Delano ar

Workshop participants also heard Madera County farm adviser Ron Vargas talk of steps now in the works to address a p arose this spring with pesticide drift.

He said a work group is drawing up guidelines on the permit process for using herbicides and it's expected that aerial ap herbicides may not be allowed after Feb. 1.

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