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FARMING THE INTERNET FOR USEFUL CROP MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

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Introduction

Timely and accurate information is critical for making sound decisions in crop management. Weather forecasts and commodity market information have a direct impact on nearly every facet of crop production. Traditional media outlets such as radio, newspaper and television have supplied this information in the past and will continue to in the future. However, with the development of the worldwide computer network known as the Internet, access to and delivery of information has become more consumer-driven and active rather than passive. Producers can now target the specific information they want and obtain it very quickly. Weather conditions and changing market information is relayed in near real-time manner. Used correctly, the Internet can provide precise, targeted information to assist in decision making. Used incorrectly, the Internet can also provide an excess of material from questionable sources. The goal of this presentation and paper is to assist the user in effectively sifting through all the information, gleaned out the material useful for crop management decisions.

This article, presentation materials, and all sites mentioned are available online at <http://extension.agron.iastate.edu/internet.htm>

Reliable Information

The accessibility of the Internet is one of it's greatest benefits. However, it can also be one of the greatest dangers. A web site is relatively easy to create and place online for anyone to view. There is no authority or organization that reviews content for accuracy or source. Because of this, unreliable information is difficult to distinguish from reliable documents. To use an analogy, it is similar to evaluating a brochure you receive by mail promoting a new product or an extension publication obtained from your local extension office. In each case, the source must be considered. Was the brochure produced or mailed by a company that has a solid reputation? The information contained in the extension publication has been produced and reviewed by specialists from a university and carries the backing of a public institution.

One way to determine the source of the information is to review the address of the internet site. An example of an Internet address or URL (uniform resource locator) might be <http://www.crop-stuff.com>. The first sections of the address (*www* and *crop-stuff*) are the identification of the site owner. These are usually designed to be easily remembered and quickly relay what the site is about or where it originates. The end of the address, *com*, is arbitrarily assigned. Most addresses are systematically organized into distinct categories in the United States: *gov* (government), *edu* (education institution), *com* (company or corporation), *org* (an organization), and *net* (network or internet service provider). Since addresses with the suffix *gov* or *edu* are not available to private sources, these provide a good source of reliable information.

Many companies use Internet addresses that people can construct without looking them up. However, be sure to examine the site and make sure it is the authentic site you were looking for. For example, the URLs <http://www.chevy.com> and <http://www.chevrolet.com> will take you to completely different locations.

Searching the Web

Because of the amount of information on the Internet, locating a particular item can be a challenge. Search engines were created for this purpose. By cataloging all the information available, they serve as an online "card catalog." By typing in a term, such as "velvetleaf," articles relating to this weed can quickly be located. Search engines will differ, however, in how they search for the requested information. Some, such as Yahoo, organize sites into categories that can be browsed. For the above example, the category "Science - Agriculture - Weed control" would likely produce sites with velvetleaf information. Other sites will search for articles containing the word "velvetleaf." For very specific searches, this will generate a list that contains articles containing the information desired. However, a search for "weed" will produce a very lengthy list of articles, many of which do not pertain to weeds in an agricultural sense. The most common Internet-wide search engines are listed in Table 1. There are also pages that will list many types of search engines by categories, such as People, News, Weather, and Software. An example can be found at <http://www.albany.net/allinone/>

Increasingly, there are more search options specific to agriculture. One of these is AgriSurf at <http://www.agrisurf.com/> By focusing specifically on resources related to agriculture, search time can be reduced.

Internet Tools

To utilize the information of the Internet, some additional tools besides a computer, an Internet connection, and web browser software may be needed. These pieces of software, called add-ins, are added to the web browser to view specific types of multimedia files and formats. Below are some of the items commonly needed to view Internet content.

Crop Management Resources

The internet provides many resources of specific interest to crop management. In addition to market information and weather, there are sites to answer nearly any question dealing with crops, soils, and pest management. Many of the prominent agriculture-related sites will have a section of links pertaining to these topics. The best way to utilize the Internet is to locate these sites early, bookmark them, and use them as a starting point for future use. The important point is to bookmark a useful site after locating it. Relying on memory to return to a useful site is usually not sufficient. Bookmarking is a feature offered by many web browsers that allows you to compile a list of commonly visited sites for returning at a later time. This develops into the user's personal reference library.

This listing of sites is intended as a brief reference and is not all-inclusive. When faced with the task of using the Internet for the first few times, these will serve as a starting-point. Each link contains many more destinations with useful information.

Table 1. Internet tools and resources useful for crop management.

Commodity Market Information

Chicago Board of Trade www.cbot.com
 Chicago Mercantile Exchange www.cme.com
 Kansas City Board of Trade www.kcbot.com

Weather Information

Natl. Weather Service, Des Moines www.crh.noaa.gov/dmx/
 Freese-Notis Weather www.weather.net
 The Weather Channel www.weather.com
 The Weather Underground www.wunderground.com/

Commodity Organizations

National Corn Growers www.ncga.com
 American Soybean Association www.oilseeds.org/asa/
 United Soybean Board www.ag.uiuc.edu/~stratsoy/

Crop Production and Protection

American Society of Agronomy www.agronomy.org
 American Crop Protection Assn. www.acpa.org
 Weed Science Society of American ext.agn.uiuc.edu/wssa/
 National IPM Network www.recusda.gov/agsys/nipmn/index.htm
 Corn Growers Guidebook www.agry.purdue.edu/agronomy/ext/corn/

Misc.

Agronomic Links Across the Globe www.agry.purdue.edu/agronomy/links/
 Council for Ag Science and Tech. www.cast-science.org

Internet Tools and Add-ins

Adobe Acrobat Reader www.adobe.com/acrobat
 Microsoft - complete list www.microsoft.com/ie/
 Microsoft Media Player www.microsoft.com/windows/mediaplayer/
 Netscape - complete list www.netscape.com/plugins/
 RealAudio & RealPlayer www.realaudio.com
 Shockwave www.macromedia.com/shockwave/download/
 Sound VQ www.yamaha-xg.com/english/xg/SoundVQ/

Iowa State University Resources

Iowa State University www.iastate.edu
 ISU Extension www.exnet.iastate.edu
 College of Agriculture www.ag.iastate.edu
 Weed Science Online www.weeds.iastate.edu
 Precision Agriculture www.precisionag.iastate.edu
 Agronomy Extension extension.agron.iastate.edu
 Plant Pathology Extension www.exnet.iastate.edu/Pages/plantpath/
 Entomology Department www.ent.iastate.edu
 Pest Mgmt. and the Environment extension.agron.iastate.edu/pme
 Ag and Biosystems Engineering www.ac.iastate.edu
 Integrated Crop Mgmt. Newsletter www.ipm.iastate.edu/ipm/icm/
 Corn Rootworm Homepage www.ent.iastate.edu/pest/rootworm/
 Iowa Manure Mgmt. Action Group extension.agron.iastate.edu/immag/

Government Resources

USDA www.usda.gov
 EPA www.epa.gov
 National Ag Statistics Service www.usda.gov/nass/
 Iowa Ag Statistics www.nass.usda.gov/ia/
 IDALS www.state.ia.us/agriculture/index.html
 National Agriculture Library www.nalusda.gov

News and Information

CNN www.cnn.com
 @gOnline www.agriculture.com

Search Engines

AltaVista www.altavista.com
 Excite www.excite.com
 GoTo www.goto.com
 Infoseek www.infoseek.com
 Lycos www.lycos.com
 Yahoo www.yahoo.com
 All-in-one Search Engine Page www.albany.net/allinone/
 AgriSurf www.agrisurf.com