Episode 9—Tales From The Farm with Annie Dee

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Announcer:

The Alabama Crops Report Podcast, your trusted information source for Alabama agriculture.

Scott Graham:

Hey everybody. Welcome in to the Alabama Crops Report Podcast, I'm Extension Entomologist, Scott Graham.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

And I'm Dr. Amanda Scherer, an Extension Plant Pathologist with Alabama Cooperative Extension. We are excited to be releasing regularly scheduled podcast episodes with up-to-date information about Alabama crops throughout the year. You'll be hearing from Extension personnel from all over the state with the latest research and management recommendations. How are you doing today, Scott?

Scott Graham:

I'll tell you what, I'm doing good. As we record here in the middle of April, I've got my first cotton trial in the ground. I'm going to go try to look at that later this week, and beans will be coming in pretty close behind that. So I'm excited and ready to get rolling.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

So am I, I think my first two trials are probably going to go in the next couple of weeks for cotton and peanuts.

Scott Graham:

Yeah, yeah, it's time to get going again. Well all right, our guest today is Ms. Annie Dee of Dee River Ranch and Dee Farms, also known, I guess, as the wife of the famous or infamous Dr. Ed Sikora, one of our other Extension Plant Pathologists. So we're really excited today to have you in Annie, how you doing?

Annie Dee:

I'm doing great, thank you, Scott, for having me today. It's a pleasure and honor to be here with you.

Scott Graham:

Good. Thank you, thank you. Well, all right, well, if you don't mind, tell us a little bit about your operation, what all... I know y'all've got a lot of different things going.

Annie Dee:

We do have a lot of different things going. At Dee River Ranch we own 10,000 acres, and we're row cropping about 4,000 acres with corn and soybeans. And we have cattle on some of our ground. We have some pine trees that we have planted, maybe some of them are as old as 20-years-old now. So we've got a lot of different things going on over there.

Scott Graham:

Yeah, a couple of weeks ago I rode through the Black Belt going home for a wedding, and I was burned down and things were starting to go. And we had Audrey Gamble on our soft [inaudible 00:02:02] the other day and she was talking a little bit about how different those soils are from some of the other soils that we have here in Alabama. So what kind of soil health practices and things that you do and what have you learned about farming those soils?

Annie Dee:

Well, we've been farming there for over 30 years now. So when we got there, it was a challenge to learn. Now let me back up, I didn't grow up on a farm and I had farmed in Florida before moving to Alabama. So that was sugar sand and that was a whole different ball game than these heavy clay soil.

Scott Graham:

Little different, yeah.

Annie Dee:

So we had a very large learning curve. They shrink and swell, you may be familiar with that practice, and with the help of cover crop and no till practices, a lot of that has really reduced or is almost non-existent now. So with the practices that we have developed over time with the help of NRCS, we now have better health with our soil,

we have better drainage, better water holding capacity, higher organic matter, and just a lot of benefits in our crops. Our yields have really improved over time and our overall plant health. So I think the soil health ties together with the plant health and how the plant's going to survive through the growing season.

Scott Graham:

I can remember. I am from Mississippi really close to the Delta region and really did a lot of work there in undergrad and grad school, then I went to west Tennessee for my PhD where it's a hundred percent no till. And I remember the first trial we planted in that mess, I call it, of no tail production. I said, "Y'all are crazy, nothing's coming up in this." And that cotton came up and it was a beautiful stand. And I said, "Well, okay." So a lot of good benefits with no till production.

Annie Dee:

Some people call that ugly farming where you have something that's live out there, you have different crop residue from last year. This year is the first year that we've actually planted into a live cover crop. We've had some trouble before getting a stand established, but now we've run a roller over the top of our beds just before the planter, so we've laid down our live cover crop, and we're hoping to have the best year ever. So, I mean, we continue to learn and try new things and really benefit from some of these practices.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yeah. And before interviewing you today, I did a little bit of research on your farm and I noticed that a lot of your philosophy is in incorporating a lot of good conservation practices. And that's a great part of sustainable agriculture and it's something that we do preach as Extension Specialists. From a plant pathologist standpoint, I know sometimes with the reduced tillage or no tillage, you can sometimes get issues with soil borne pathogens that are hanging out from one season to the next. So when you guys first started to transition to no tillage or reduced tillage and cover crops, did you notice that you had to change some of your management practices for these diseases and insect pests as well?

Annie Dee:

Well, honestly when we first started no till, we were using cover crops and started no till, we really failed at every aspect of it and it's just been a learning process the whole way. We didn't have good weed control and if you don't have good weed control you're lost from the start. But really we've done a much better job and I do think you have to take a holistic approach to the whole thing. And I do hear sometimes people, plant pathologist in particular saying, you have to get rid of that crop residue that's where some diseases stay. And somehow we have to figure out how to control the whole thing.

I'm actually working with Rishi, Dr. Rishi Prasad, here at Auburn University. And he's helping us understand that the phosphorus that we apply is not going down into the soil. So we have an experiment we're going to start later this week on trying to knife phosphorus down into the soil to see if we can't get some more phosphorus lower in the soil. It hasn't been going down and he's been doing some soil testing for every two inches, so zero to two, two to four, four to six down to 36 inches. And so we have tremendous phosphorus at

the top of the soil profile, but once we get to about six inches, it's very decreased and it's because we haven't been doing any tillage. So he's working with us on that to try to figure out how to help us get the phosphorus down into the soil profile where it needs to be for the plants to take it up. So that's exciting.

Scott Graham:

Yeah, yeah. I think us entomologists, we kind of get on that soap box too, burndown a month prior to planting. And really, as long as, and I know you know this and have seen it in your years farming, as long as we're doing something either seed treatment or mixing in something when we do burn down or at planning from an insecticide standpoint, generally we can control whatever bugs we have in the field at that time.

So that's one of the things I always say, is we're doing cover crops for a lot of reasons, sometimes it's weed suppression, sometimes it's trying to make sure we have as much moisture in the ground or whatever it is. So if that burndown timing doesn't work, we can still manage it. I'm sure disease standpoint the same way. So everything's a little bit different. This is April 19th, 2021 as we record, but what's going on right now at Dee Farms and what's the outlook looking like this year?

Annie Dee:

Well, we've planted about 2000 acres of corn and we just finished planting, we had kind of a delay due to wet weather early on, we got a little bit of corn planted, maybe 30 acres just to set our planters. And then it rained and then it was cold and then we got maybe another 700, but now we've gotten 2000 acres of corn planted just as of this weekend. And it's dry, the weather's dry, so we're irrigating that crop, trying to get the corn seed to pop out of the ground and get a good healthy start. And it's warm enough now, I think it'll really take off and run.

Because so many times as farmers, we rush to the field because we see the neighbor or we think we can get out there and it's a little too wet and we don't get a good stand. And if we don't get a good stand to start with, we never have a good outcome. And it's so hard to leave those planters when you've waited all winter to go to the field and it's just so hard to leave them. But so far this year, I think we've done a pretty good job of waiting until the conditions got right.

So they finished corn on the weekend and then they started planting soybeans, and as of this morning, they had 400 acres of soybeans planted. And we're using two 40 foot planners on 30 inch centers. And so they should be able to plant if everything goes right, which is a really, really big if, it never does go exactly like, you... [crosstalk 00:08:51] We had a tractor down one day and the planter another day. But anyway, with both of those tractors and planters, we should be able to finish planting soybeans this week. So we'll have about 2000 acres of soybeans too.

Scott Graham:

Yeah, that's good. I jumped out a little early for my cotton trials this year, but part of that is when you're trying to evaluate how well these treatments are acting, you really want to stress it anyway. But that's good that we

got all our corn now. And you said the beans'll finish up this week, so that's good. And then you get to catch your breath for a minute there before you get busy again.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yeah and I definitely will reiterate that from a research standpoint, we both mentioned that we got our first couple of trials out here soon or more are going out. We try and put them out in the optimal point where whatever pest we're looking at, whether it's a seedling disease and so that's why my cotton and peanut trials are going to go out a little sooner for those two looking at seed treatments. But when we're looking for foliar diseases, like target spot of cotton, then we'll plant them a little bit later. So for you guys, you want to plant to avoid all of that. And so it's always fun to have a producer or someone else to talk to, to see your different perspective for our listeners too.

Annie Dee:

Well seed treatments, Amanda, can be so important. And sometimes, they had said in the past, they being university leaders, have said in the past that as it warms up, you don't necessarily need seed treatment on your soybeans or an insecticide. That they'll do just fine if it's warm enough, you really won't have the disease pressure. And we've found that not to be true. So no matter when we plant it, we make sure that we get a seed treatment and an insecticide on both our corn and our soybeans, just to give that plant a real good start. And if you get a good start, some of the rest of it takes care of itself. And the insects, if you have a good start, a good, healthy plant, those insects don't seem to bother it, even if they're around, they aren't going for those healthy plants. If you get a good plant, they can be good through the whole season. So it's all starts in the very beginning.

Scott Graham:

Yep, that's right. You may not need to see treatment, but you might, and if you guess wrong, you're in trouble, like you said, so that's exactly right.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

And we've had a couple of our agronomists for both cotton and peanut on, and they've reiterated that too. Where seed treatments can really go a long way. And so then maybe after that, you can kind of play with, if you need to do an in-furrow fungicide application or something. But really starting out with healthy, good quality seed where you're going to get a nice germination out of those crops goes a long way. So starting just off on the right foot can really help.

Annie Dee:

I guess I would like to ask you, Amanda, if I could about, I was offered some free fungicide to put in-furrow that the plant would take up and maybe wouldn't need to add, we're talking about corn now, maybe wouldn't need to use fungicide later in the season that that would give you season long control. I said, "No," I didn't even want

the free product because I said, "I'm afraid that, that fungicide may kill the good fungi in the soil and have a negative effect on the whole soil microsystem." And so I said, "No." So what's your thoughts on that?

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Well, that's actually one of... In plant pathology, that's kind of become one of the buzz words, the soil microbiome and what we're doing in terms of these fungicide applications, how that's affecting soil health down the road. And there's still a lot that we don't know about it. All we can say is that a lot of these fungicides, you're right, are broad spectrum where they're not going to discriminate against just going after the pathogenic fungi or even bacteria that are in the soil, it's just going to go after everything. So I don't know which fungicide it is specifically, but I can see your concern. That is a big, hot button topic that we are definitely looking at in the plant pathology world. So hopefully we'll have more to say down the road. And we actually have a couple of researchers here at Auburn that are doing a lot with the microbiome.

Annie Dee:

Well please keep me posted on that because I don't want to miss some helpful solutions, but at the same time, I don't want to go out there and just do something that's going to mess up my whole soil health.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Totally agree with you there. I'll definitely keep you posted.

Annie Dee:

Thank you.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

So now that you've talked about this year and what your planting season is looking like, I know for producers, you're constantly thinking about the future of your farm. So what kind of future plans do you have? Are there different practices you're going to look into? I know you mentioned some of your research that you're doing with Rishi, which is great. But anything else you would like to talk about today to kind of round out that episode?

Annie Dee:

Well, a few things that we're hoping for are some more grain storage. With the high yields we're getting, we have a big logistics issue, just getting the crop, especially the corn crop, hauled away because we don't have enough storage to hold our whole corn crop, maybe about a quarter of our crop. So we have a lot of trucking issues and logistic issues where if we had more storage and we could hold that corn even for a month or two, it would really alleviate a lot of the stress and struggle that we have on the farm. So that's one of our concerns. We aren't ready to do it just yet. And I think with the tariffs on the steel, the grain bin costs have gone higher as well as just the supply chain being broken, I think, so we aren't in a hurry to do that, but it is something that we need. We're hoping for a nice shop.

Farmers always have a long list of things they want and they think they need, some of them are wants, and some of them are needs. But we're hoping to get a nice, good enclosed shop where we can work on our equipment, no matter what the weather is. And those are just a few of the things. We're irrigating about 3,000 of our 4,000 acres, so maybe somewhere down the road, we might get the rest of our acreage irrigated. We have seen tremendous yield improvements with irrigation. We get a lot of rain throughout the year, but not at the right time, so that's really been a big help in both corn and soybeans. So those are just a few things we're wishing for, but in the meantime, we're going to work with what have.

Scott Graham:

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much. We really appreciate your time today. We learned a lot.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yes, thank you, Annie. This has been a really great episode. You're our first producer that we've actually had on the podcast, so we really appreciate it.

Annie Dee:

Well, thanks for having me. It's been just a great time to be with both of you and I look forward to being with you again. Thanks a bunch.

Announcer:

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