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Dairy goat farmer earns Ontario Forage Master title

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November 22, 2011



Manure and fertilizer is not enough for healthy soil, you need earthworms too, advises this Lambton County farmer

By KAREN BRIGGS

Anthony Sjaarda, of Wyoming, Ontario, has been named the Ontario Forage Master for 2011 by the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association.

Sjaarda, his wife Marjorie and their five sons, operate Sjaarda Caprine Farms, which milks 1,600 dairy goats and cultivates 160 acres of forage as well as 20 acres of grain. Their hayfields, which are 80 per cent alfalfa, and 20 per cent timothy and other grasses and legumes, were visited by judges in early summer, before Sjaarda harvested his second of four cuts of hay. The results of that judging, with subsequent hay and soil samples, made Sjaarda, a first-time entrant, the winner of the Lambton County competition and sent him on to the provincial competition.

"I gave a 20-minute PowerPoint presentation to the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association on the whole process from choosing seed, to taking it off the field and correctly storing it," said Sjaarda.

"I'm not so much concerned about the height of a stand, but on the quality of that stand. Goats need a fine stem with lots of leaves. People think goats will eat anything, but in fact they are more sensitive than cattle in many ways. Goats cannot tolerate mould, for example, so growing, harvesting, and storage of forages is critical to the health of our goats."

Sjaarda's presentation, which made him Ontario Forage Master, also touched on soil improvement. "A lot of people seem to depend on manure and fertilizer on the fields, but manure is not the answer," he said. "Just as bees are crucial to the health of a crop, I think earthworms are the key to healthy soil."

Sjaarda has now qualified to represent Ontario in the 2012 American Forage and Grassland Council's Forage Spokesperson contest, to be held January 8-11th, 2011, at the Crowne Plaza in Louisville, Kentucky. "I'll be up against a lot of dairy farmers, and some of those producers out West who farm thousands of acres, so it will be interesting. I like to compete, because I find the process gives you an opportunity to learn from other farmers. You can always pick up something new."

The Ontario Forage Masters (OFM) program, now in its 24th year, is designed to promote excellence in forage production. This years' competition was sponsored by OSCIA, Pickseed Canada, SGS Agri-Food Laboratories, and the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. **BF**

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