

Biltmore Growing Crops for Food and Fuel

Dec 11, 2012

Written by Dale Neal, Asheville Citizen Times



Field to Fryer to Fuel: 50 acres of canola fields were planted on the Biltmore Estate in partnership with Blue Ridge Biofuels in a Field to Fryer to Fuel program. 12-11-12 – Erin Brethauer (ebrethau@citizen-times.com)

ASHEVILLE -- Rather than importing cooking oil from Canada or fuel oil from the Mideast, what if you could grow what you eat, and ultimately, use to power your vehicle?

The Biltmore Estate, Blue Ridge Biofuels and other partners are taking up that challenge under the Field to Fryer to Fuel program. Backed by a \$130,000 grant from the Biofuels Center of North Carolina and \$64,000 in federal economic development funds, the partners hope to grow a sustainable food and energy supply with a new cash crop for mountain farmers and more jobs in alternative energy.

“We’re trying to build out a business model that will be economically viable for farmers, for local restaurants and for Blue Ridge Biofuels,” explained Ron Townley, working with the AdvantageWest economic development group to shepherd the project.

Planted back in September, the fields alongside the French Broad River are now green and ankle-high with the canola crop, which looks a lot like kale or mustard greens. Biltmore workers planted about 60

acres of the winter crop. After the plants grow about waist-high, they will be harvested next spring. The pressed plants themselves can be reused as a valuable feed stock to be fed to the estate's livestock herds.

Blue Ridge Biofuels will take the crop's real payoff — the canola seed — and press that into a food-grade cooking oil which can be used by chefs frying up dishes in the kitchens of Biltmore restaurants.

The used cooking oil will be then be recycled by Blue Ridge Biofuels into homegrown biodiesel, a fuel that can then be used in the estate's farm tractors and other vehicles.

The crops should produce about 7,000 gallons of cooking oil. Blue Ridge Biofuels should be able to collect and process about 5,300 gallons of biodiesel.



Woody Eaton, general manager of Blue Ridge Biofuels, stands in a canola field on the Biltmore property. The fields are part of the Field to Fryer to Fuel program, a partnership between the estate, chefs and biofuels. / Erin Brethauer ebrethau@citizen-times.com

Ted Katsigianis, Biltmore's vice president of agricultural sciences, said the estate is experimenting with four varieties, using different soil types on the estate. The estate uses seeds that were not genetically modified.

The project is just the latest effort toward greater sustainability at Biltmore. The estate has installed an array of 5,000 solar panels to generate electricity. Biltmore also uses biodiesel in many of its vehicles, and has converted visitors shuttle buses to run on propane.

"It's been a longtime family interest and part of our mission to be a community leader in environmental issues. We would like to become sustainable with our food and energy," said Chuck Pickering, Biltmore's executive vice president.

For Blue Ridge Biofuels, securing more vegetable oil as the basic ingredient for its production makes good business sense, said Blue Ridge general manager Woody Eaton. "I would like to see other farmers plant oil-producing crops that Blue Ridge could then turn into biodiesel."

Soybeans yield about 45 gallons of oil per acre, and canola can produce up to 100 gallons per acre, which could prove an attractive winter cash crop for area farmers.

The program could help the state as a whole achieve its goal of locally producing 10 percent of its fuel supply by 2017, Townley said. "This pilot program is about closing the loops of our supply chain."