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North Carolina tobacco grower dodges 2,4-D bullet

Roy Roberson

May 9, 2013

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- Tobacco growers with a fraction of Eddie Johnson's experience know that 2,4-D and tobacco just don't mix.
- "Tobacco plants are so susceptible to 2,4-D you can wave a bag at a tobacco plant, and it'll fall over dead," Johnson says
- However, on that particular morning the mixture of 2,4-D and his float houses, or greenhouses, filled with the future of his next tobacco crop, there was nothing funny about it.

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DESPITE A LIFETIME of tobacco production, North Carolina grower Eddie Johnson says he knew of few options to save tobacco plants from 2,4-D contamination.

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Eddie Johnson has grown tobacco in Surry County, N.C.,

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for a long time — long enough to be a charter member of the Tobacco Growers Association of North Carolina and well enough to be a former North Carolina and Southeast Swisher/Sunbelt Expo Farmer of the Year.

But, while working on his diversified farm, Johnson smelled the unmistakable scent of 2,4-D.

It wasn't the unpleasant organophosphate smell that bothered him, it was two greenhouses filled with tender young transplants — the only plants he had for his upcoming tobacco crop.

What Eddie Johnson smelled that February morning was disaster.

His son was spraying 2,4-D on some pasture land adjacent to the greenhouses filled with young tobacco plants.

"I don't know whether the wind changed, or exactly how it happened, but drift from the 2,4-D was reaching me, and the greenhouses were between me and the sprayer, so I knew we were in trouble," Johnson says.

Tobacco growers with a fraction of his experience know that 2,4-D and tobacco just don't mix. "Tobacco plants are so susceptible to 2,4-D you can wave a bag at a tobacco plant, and it'll fall over dead," Johnson adds.

However, on that particular morning the mixture of 2,4-D and his float houses, or greenhouses, filled with the future of his next tobacco crop, there was nothing funny about it.

"I didn't really know what to do," Johnson recalls.

"My immediate thought was that most of those plants were going to die, unless I did something, but at that point I didn't really know what that something was going to be," he adds.

I had worked with Lynn Howard, when he was with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture for a long time, and I called him and told him my situation, Johnson says.

At that time, Lynn had done some work with a new soil amendment called Quick-Sol. Lynn said this material might help the plants better survive the stress of being subjected to 2,4-D.

The individual grow cells that hold the tobacco plants are tiny, and there's not much soil in them, so I was skeptical a soil amendment would make any difference, Johnson says.

"I wasn't expecting much, but we saved those two houses of tobacco transplants. I'm confident without the emergency treatment with the new product, we would have lost a majority of those plants," he adds.

Known to tobacco growers as float houses, these structures can hold enough young tobacco plants to plant 100 acres or more of tobacco.

The transplants float on a shallow bed of water and all the nutrients and crop protection materials are added to the water.

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Long-time Virginia Tech Tobacco Specialist David Reed says, "Commercial greenhouse production of tobacco transplants first appeared in Virginia in the mid-1980's and has spread rapidly throughout the Southeast tobacco belt."

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