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By Ed Leahy

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Veg growers seek plastic mulch alternative



New group of veg growers led by Innovative Farmers will explore biodegradable and non-plastic options for weed control

A new group of Vegetable growers will explore alternatives to plastic mulch for weed control with the launch of a new field lab by Innovative Farmers.

Growers are often reliant on plastic films to control weeds, but in the wake of massive environmental concern about plastics' impact, the need for alternatives are greater than ever.

The group will work with researchers at Coventry University's Centre for Agroecology, Water, and Resilience, (CAWR) and will design a practical on-farm trial to test alternatives, such as biodegradable and non-plastic film.

Ben Raskin, head of horticulture at the Soil Association, said: "Farmers and growers face a big challenge when it comes to finding non-plastic mulches that really work for both farmers and the environment. Farmer-led research is critical to the much-needed exploration of sustainable alternatives.

"We are hopeful that by testing biodegradable and non-plastic materials in real-life on-farm, this field lab will identify whether more environmentally friendly and practical solutions exist."

The farmer-led trial will begin with a meeting on 26 September, and is open to any grower.

The field lab will be facilitated by the not-for-profit network Innovative Farmers, which enables farmer-led research, and it will build on plot trials done by CAWR at Coventry University.

These trials, carried out as part of the EU funded project Organic-PLUS, have indicated that the biodegradable alternatives will be as effective as plastic – with the added benefit that they don't need removal after harvest.

The field lab will put these indications to the test in real-farm settings, and the wider Organic-PLUS project is also investigating the full life-cycle of the

various materials to give a complete picture of their environmental impact.

Dr Francis Rayns from CAWR said: "This area of research is important for all producers as we try to reduce plastic pollution and move towards truly sustainable growing systems.

"The Organic-PLUS team is excited by the opportunity to collaborate with Innovative Farmers and work with a range of growers in real-life farming situations."

The launch meeting will be held on Thursday September 26 at Ryton Organic Gardens, Coventry, for any farmers interested in joining the field lab or finding out more.

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