**Meet our Feb. 6 Speaker, Steve Groff**
Popular lecturer Steve Groff started small with what he now proudly calls his 'permanent cover cropping system' - a rotation heavy on ground covers and reliant upon no-till planting. He decided to experiment with ways to slow the erosion, partly because the Lancaster County, PA soil is among the best in the country and partly because the soil washed - via the Susquehanna River - into the Chesapeake Bay.

The new system keeps his ground covered all year. In the process, he has greatly reduced erosion, improved soil quality and knocked back both weeds and insects. Moreover, his vegetable and grain yields have improved. Groff mixes cash crops such as corn, soybeans, broccoli, tomatoes, peppers and pumpkins with cover crops and a unique no-till system that has kept some of his farm soil untouched by a plow for more than 30 years.

'I believe that any system has to be profitable for the farmer to be sustainable for the long term,' Groff says. 'Environmental responsibility should be carried out to the best of the producer's ability in relation to the knowledge and experience he or she has.'

Thanks to his no-till system, his annual erosion losses remain just a fraction of the county's average. Groff likes to show a videotape he shot during a 1999 hurricane that contrasts muddy storm water pouring off a neighbor's field to small, clear rivulets draining slowly off his fields.

And although he first began using no-till and cover crops to minimize erosion, he soon found enormous benefits in the continual fight against insect pests and weeds. They also found that the longer he practiced no-till, the lower the soil's bulk density, giving the soil greater porosity for root growth and air and water movement.

Less compaction, combined with Groff's permanent vegetative residue, helps retain moisture, especially important during droughts. Pennsylvania and the mid-Atlantic suffered months of record drought in 1999, but Groff's soils soaked up nearly every drop of rain that did fall and, when he irrigated, the water was used more efficiently.

'I think the community feels a sense of pride in the way I take care of the soil and the environment as a whole,' Groff says. 'They seem to appreciate the role I play in being a positive influence on this.'

'Erosion takes away your very best soil!' Groff says. 'It's your surface soil with the highest fertility that goes down the drain' during a rainstorm. If you farm land that is susceptible to erosion, controlling it should be your top priority.'

'A good approach is to feed the soil, rather than feed the plant,' he says. 'A good soil will grow healthy crops. Don't overdo it with fertility amendments as they are a waste and can be a pollutant.'

As would anyone who truly wishes to stay innovative, Groff continues to fine tune his system and adapt it to other crops.

'I'm always planning to research new strategies because my ideal continues to evolve,' he says.

*The above was published by SARE. Profile written by Valerie Berton,*