

## LEARNING GROUND ON AIR

### Farmers become trainers

Televised farmer contests in Vietnam have become a trusted information source about using pesticides safely and wisely. Through the years, the government-initiated contests have enabled champion farmers to pass on knowledge and skills to a wider audience. Farmer viewers are hooked because they look up to people who can relate first-hand to the challenges of farming and who speak in a language they truly understand. Here in Vietnam, they have discovered a learning ground.

#### Action

Nguyen Thi Hai is glued to her television. The 37-year-old farmer watches a play that talks about her livelihood and the responsible use of pesticides. The performers are not actors, but real farmers trained on the subject matter. As cameras roll, they engage in all sorts of team competitions – acting, dancing, singing, talking about their villages, and answering challenging questions about the use of pesticides in agriculture.

Farmer-to-farmer appeal keeps the contests popular. Hundreds of Vietnamese farmers flock to see fellow farmers perform on stage. Nguyen Thi Hai and thousands view the show at night from their TV sets. While enjoying a good dash of entertainment, spectators get a better understanding of using pesticides responsibly.

Questions fired at farmer contestants require more than yes-or-no answers. The show's host asks one team: "What are your criteria for selecting pesticides to be applied on your vegetables?" The lead farmer explains that the pesticide must be in the government's list of permitted chemicals. It must be effective against pests, but safe for humans. The farmer goes



Vegetable grower Nguyen Thi Hai is a fan of televised farmer contests.

on to cite more criteria, demonstrating that he clearly knows what he's talking about.

As a reaction to the farmers' answers and team performance, judges by the front row raise their scorecards. Occasionally, they offer added explanations or give corrections when answers are off the mark. By watching the contest dynamics, audiences pick up important lessons about good agricultural practices.

TV transmissions of over 20 contests across Vietnam have reached farmers by the millions in over four years. Working behind the scenes is the Plant Protection Department (PPD) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. With the help of CropLife Asia funding, PPD has opened Farmer Field Schools (FFS) that train on the safe use of pesticides and draw participants to the farmer contest.

#### From reel to real life

Nguyen Thi Hai of Vinh Phuc province has not been to a farmer contest, but she is good enough to be one of the contestants.



Vietnamese farmers take the stage to promote responsible practices.

In 2005, PPD ran training sessions in her province and capped the year with a farmer contest. About 500 farmers attended the show. Many years later, Nguyen still practices what she learned and gets occasional reminders from farmer contests aired on TV.

Nguyen and her husband support two children out of their earnings from their farm. In their province, about 70 per cent of people depend on agriculture as a means of livelihood. Each year, the province produces up to 200,000 tonnes of vegetables in nine to ten thousand hectares. Tools for protecting crops against pests are valuable to maintaining livelihoods. "I use pesticides because of caterpillars," Nguyen cites the importance of crop protection products.

As a fruit and vegetable grower, Nguyen believes her PPD training in the correct use of pesticides helped to achieve higher production. In particular, she learned about the lifecycle of insects and the right stage to apply pesticides for different pests. She says putting this knowledge into practice effectively got rid of pests that devoured her crops.

Nguyen is also familiar with the idea of minimising pesticide residues as part of the food safety campaign. From her training, she learned to spray her vegetables according to product label recommendations – meaning many days before harvest. She says the interval leaves enough time for pesticide residues to break down before her produce reaches the consumer.

"When we apply pesticides, we wear protective clothing," Nguyen cites another example of what she picked up from her training. She shows how farmers in her area recycle sacks used to package animal feeds into aprons that are worn for self-protection when spraying crops. Farmers welcome the clever, inexpensive adaptations because they are comfortable to wear in hot climates.

Nguyen points to a big drum that reminds farmers to keep fields free from litter. Now, empty pesticide containers go straight into that drum – another practice picked up from the training.

Nguyen leads a tour to her small plots of cabbages, peas, watermelons and tomatoes. She explains that farming has been her life for 22 years, and her land has given her good returns. Less than a third of a hectare in size, her farm generates an income of about US\$2,000 a year and feeds her family of four.

For someone like Nguyen, learning about wise use of agricultural technologies has life-long value.

### Winning combination

The PPD training initiatives on the responsible use of pesticides have reached almost half of the 64 provinces and municipalities in Vietnam. The Plant Protection Department is now ramping up its efforts with plans to cover more provinces every year. The winning combination of training and televised contests will continue to play a significant role in reaching farmers throughout the country.



Nguyen demonstrates how to turn sack material into protective clothing.