Innovative new willow woodchip trial to tackle apple scab in orchards launched

Farmers are investigating willow woodchip mulch as an effective method of tackling apple scab in a new field lab with Innovative Farmers.

The farmer-led field lab is trialling willow mulch in commercial orchards and will be carrying out a cost benefit analysis of this non-chemical control approach, following initial research by the University of Reading into the pharmaceutical qualities of willow.

A range of growers, including members of the National Association of Cider Makers and small holders, are taking part in the AHDB sponsored field lab that was launched at an event last week with Sheppy’s Cider.

They will all compare results and share knowledge via Innovative Farmers - the not-for-profit network that enables farmer-led research and is organising the trials with support from Sustainable Farming Consultancy.

Hugh Edwards, farm manager at Heineken UK in Herefordshire, is taking part in the trial.

He said: “We’re taking part in the willow woodchip mulching trial to see if we can reduce diseases in the orchards without using too many chemicals. Within commercial orchards apple scab is the number one disease, so any way we can reduce that would be beneficial.

“I think it’s important that research like this involves the farmers who actually carry out the work. We are just dipping our toe in the water with this trial, but if we get some good results then we can look to roll this technique out to more trees and more orchards.”

Ben Raskin, head of horticulture at the Soil Association, said:

“Willow woodchip contains the active ingredient in Aspirin - salicylic acid – and the initial research has suggested that a single application in early spring can help tackle apple scab.

“Mulch is a great tool for building soil health and for water retention but using it to tackle scab is new territory, so this is a really exciting trial.

“It will be especially important to see if it is cost effective in real farm settings, so it is essential that farmers lead the way in research like this and we’re pleased to have a mix of growers from smaller and larger systems taking part in the field lab.”

For more information on the trial or to join the Innovative Farmers network for free visit

www.innovativefarmers.org