GEORGETOWN: There’s no such thing as a typical day in the life of an extension agent. Just ask Cory Whaley, 32, county agent for agriculture production in Sussex County. A year and a half on the job, and every day is different with new challenges to meet.

The University of Delaware hired Whaley in November 2005 to replace retiring agent Derby Walker.

“People told me I had big shoes to fill,” Whaley said of his legendary predecessor.

Whaley has allowed his initial time on the job as an opportunity to become acquainted with the people and issues that are important to Sussex County agriculture.

His extension office in the new Elbert N. and Ann V. Carvel Research and Education Center on Route 9 in Georgetown reflects a busy and varied schedule. His desk is decorated with manuals and reports on an array of agricultural subjects. Insect displays, including a large hornet’s nest are kept on hand for school presentations. A 25” measuring wheel lends agricultural ambiance and a large 4-H sticker on a file cabinet testifies to Whaley’s early connection with extension programming.

Connecting with other farmers and growers takes time, Whaley says. He has had to bone up his knowledge of Delaware’s many crops.

Organizing the Sussex Country Agronomic Crop Breakfast series has been a good place for Whaley to start.

Topics such as Nutrient Management for Field crops, Grain Marketing, Pest Management Updates and Corn Production have been well-received by attendees of the series. Whaley has appreciated the social atmosphere the seminars offer as well the chance to get to meet with local farmers and exchange valuable knowledge.

The feedback Whaley receives during these meetings is important. Their ideas help to frame future workshops and seminars that will target specific concerns. He also meets annually with a diverse group of farmers and business people that serve on an advisory board.

Growing up, Whaley spent a great deal of time on a farm. He remembers his grandparents, Bill and Marian Jones’ hog, poultry and grain operation. He recalls always having fresh vegetables on the dinner table. Whaley’s parents, Ken and Pat, still tend the family farm in Seaford, growing corn and soybeans.
An active member of the Seaford Blue Jays 4-H Club as a child, Whaley said that agriculture and growing up near a farm were major influences in his life. It also helped him fund college expenses.

He worked several summers growing vegetables that were either sold at a produce stand at the end of their lane or hauled to the Laurel Farmers’ Auction Market. Over two summers, Whaley worked in his grandparent’s chicken houses to help pay for college.

After graduating from Seaford High School, Whaley earned his bachelor’s degree in horticulture from Clemson University in 1996. A master’s degree from the University of Delaware in weed science, under the advisement of Dr. Mark VanGessel soon followed in 2000.

Dr. Henry Wilson, of Virginia Eastern Shore Agriculture and Research Center acted as Whaley’s advisor as he earned his doctorate in weed science; concentrating on weed control programs in corn and on characterizing herbicide resistant pigweed.

While at Virginia Tech, Whaley met his future wife, Erin Giebel, now a small animal veterinarian at the Savannah Animal Hospital in Lewes. The Whaleys reside on the east side of the county, in Milford.

There have been some challenges with the new position. Whaley smiles as he admits that his age and education do not always impress an established farmer.

“Building credibility with the community takes time,” Whaley said. He approaches the reconnection to agriculture in Sussex County, after 10 years traveling between college and home, with patience and optimism.

New challenges are met with curiosity and zest. The unusual summer flood of 2006, occurring just seven months after becoming county agent, was one of the big ones.

“The flood was a big disaster - huge, that faced our county,” Whaley said. The county offices too, were flooded with questions about water-related diseases, fungicides and their applications.

“The wide-range of talented specialists at the University of Delaware is just excellent,” Whaley explains. “UD has a huge network of experts to provide advice and troubleshooting.”

“And then there are the calls…,” Whaley smiles as he reflects on some of the more interesting phone calls and walk-ins he has received so far in his extension career.

An unusual and large legume pod came across his desk last year from a homeowner. “I knew we didn’t grow it here,” Whaley recalls as he saw it for the first time. Measuring a foot long and about an inch and a half wide, with a few hours of detective work, he was able to identify it as a ‘sword bean’ native to Asia.
A wide variety of spiders and ants have come in for identification, Whaley said. Each weather and temperature pattern brings a predictable outbreak of certain insects. Part of his job is to provide identification services to professionals in the pest control industry.

“In crop production, a multitude of factors go into discovering the source of a problem,” Whaley said. “Weather, tillage, planting depth, fertilization, pests, and herbicide use, just to name a few, all need to be considered.”

“We’re sort of like Farm Science Investigators,” Whaley said, half-joking that an extension-theme TV series of that title might become popular.

“I want farming to remain sustained in Delaware,” Whaley said. “I am excited about the potential positive and profitable level of return for growers this year, especially in corn and soybean markets.”

Whaley is also excited about his future with Cooperative Extension. “Day to day, I concentrate on doing a good job. I hope to be here for 30 years – doing the best I can for the people of Sussex County.”

Cutline for photo:
County Agriculture Agent Corey Whaley at his Extension desk in Georgetown. Besides papers and books, many insects and plant materials land here for inspection.

Photo credit: M. Walfred