

Gearing up Organic Production on Salt Spring Island

As “eating local” becomes a mantra in ever-widening circles of people in many communities we know that the demand for local food far exceeds the supply. In 2005, Island Natural Growers, the Gulf Islands Chapter of the Canadian Organic Growers, conducted a study which showed that we are growing only about 5% of the produce that people on Salt Spring eat in a year. In response, ING developed a series of workshops aimed at helping commercial growers to increase production.

Over the past two years, with funding assistance from the Islands Agri-Food Initiative, the "Gearing Up" project has delivered seven workshops, six talks and several field days on a wide range of topics. They included improving farming practices and technical skills, developing the farm business, finding tools that are appropriate for small scale production and expanding the season into the winter months. Twenty different presenters were invited to share their knowledge and wisdom. These included growers Michael Ableman and Linda Gilkeson of Salt Spring, Heather Stretch and John and Kathy Elrich from Vancouver Island, and Rob Hettler from the Okanagan as well as UBC soil scientist Art Bomke IPM expert Kristine Schlamp from Kwantlen College and others with specialized practical expertise.

The workshop series was considered a key tool for building a local, sustainable food system on the island; but did we achieve our objectives?

Total attendance at the workshop series was 293 with most workshops drawing between 30 and 50 people keen to learn the tricks of the trade. Seventy percent of the workshop participants were commercial growers already selling into the local market and a similar percentage said they are planning on increasing production. Eighty two percent found the content relevant to their operation and the majority of participants (78%) said the workshops would help them plan for future expansion.

To get a sense of how this translated on the ground we also interviewed the growers to see if crop production levels in 2007 had increased since the baseline study was done in 2005. Vegetable production had increased by an estimated 18% by weight without a corresponding increase in acreage, suggesting more intensive production and increased efficiencies. Crops showing significant increases in production were winter squash, garlic, potatoes, and strawberries. Mushrooms were also introduced to the range of produce sold on the island. Thirty percent of farmers surveyed indicated they intend to increase production in 2008 and new acreage has been planted.

The need for skills development and more technical information is on-going and educational events are expected to become a regular part of the growing year. But more is needed if we are to develop a local food system on the island. ING is

now embarking on the "Growing Up Organic" project. This project is funded by Canadian Organic Growers and is aimed at increasing organic production and the amount of locally grown food served in local institutions. This summer and fall ING will be working with two institutions—the Gulf Islands Secondary School and Meadowbrook, a seniors housing facility—and farmers on the island to develop a coordinated and collaborative system of production and distribution for replacing at least some of the imported food that currently dominates the food service in these institutions.

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