

The Canadian Organic Grower

Editor

Janet Wallace
52 Fundy View Drive
Alma NB E4H 1H7
janet@cog.ca

Contributing Editors

Roxanne Beavers, Matthew Holmes,
Pamela Irving, Anne Macey,
Beth McMahon, Stuart McMillan,
Gwen O'Reilly, Elizabeth White

Advertising

contact COG office (see address below)
or email ads@cog.ca

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323 Chapel St, Ottawa ON
K1N 7Z2

T: 613-216-0741 or 1-888-375-7383
F: 613-236-0743

office@cog.ca www.cog.ca

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Cover photo: Prairie slough on Good Spirit Organic Farm, near Naicam, Saskatchewan, where Peyton Leavitt and Jonathan Lee have a wood-fired bakery, as well as sheep, goats and poultry.

Photo credit: Janet Wallace

EDITOR'S CORNER

From East to West

In June, I was in Regina helping staff the COG booth at the Western Canada Farm Progress Show. The difference between the flat prairie landscape and my home by the Bay of Fundy was not nearly as great as the disparity between East Coast (or even West Coast) organics and conventional prairie agribusiness.

To get from the farm show's parking lot to our display, I walked in the shadow of sprayers. Their cabs are equipped with carbon filters to cut down on herbicide inhalation while spraying and the booms are 120-foot long. If you walk forty paces, you can see just how large a pass that will cover. Many of the market gardens I've seen in the Maritimes and on the West Coast could be sprayed in one pass. Even the tires of much of the equipment were taller than I am. In more ways than one, the soil is far away from the operators of these machines.

Driving home the scale of operations, one visitor to the COG booth said "My neighbour has 16,000 acres around us. He sprays right through the sloughs and wet ground because that's faster than turning around. All that spray is ending up in our drinking water." Granted, many farmers don't spray into wetlands but with 65 million acres (26 million ha) farmed in Saskatchewan alone, agriculture has an enormous environmental impact.

Of the several hundred exhibitors, COG was the only organic organization at the show. Only a handful of exhibits sold products related to soil improvement. In contrast, there

were countless displays devoted to selling herbicides, sprayers and spray nozzles. Fertilizers and insecticides also had their place there. Strangely enough, seed—an essential part of farming—wasn't being promoted at many tables. Chemicals and big equipment were the hot products.

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The scope of the show should not have surprised me. In Saskatchewan, only 2.5% of farms are organic and that's much higher than in Manitoba (1.2%) and Alberta (0.5%). But stats are one thing, seeing the farmers and the farmland is another. While travelling through the province, I saw vast flat fields of genetically engineered canola and smelled the sprays used on it. But I was also overwhelmed by the beauty of the organic farms with the woodlands, the hedgerows and the wetlands teeming with birds. Nothing compares to watching pelicans soar above the lakes and gently rolling hills while standing in a lush field of flowering alfalfa. With the huge sky all around, the beauty wasn't just something I saw, it was something I felt at my core.

The richness of the prairie soil is partnered with a wealth of biodiversity. For example, as we staffed the table together, Arnold Taylor, COG's president, told me that there are bears, moose and

cougars on his farm near Kenaston, Saskatchewan.

Just as the landscape has pockets of organic farms, the farm show also attracted some organic growers. As the show went on, I felt more at home. The best part was meeting the transitional farmers—people who were considering making the change or were in the process of it. Many of the transitional farmers had young children. Several women pushing strollers told me that they didn't want to keep using chemicals. In some cases, they had already stopped spraying but didn't know what the next step was.

Organic farmers dropped by our table. Many talked about having been at the breaking point years before when they had to either sell the farm or go organic. "I just couldn't afford to farm that way any more," said one farmer and his view was echoed by many. Others mentioned health issues. One farmer stopped spraying because he was sick for a month every spring after spraying.

Although the organic farmers sometimes spoke of crop failures that sounded like biblical plagues, they were upbeat. One smiled while he said, "We haven't had a harvest in years. There were two years of drought, then the flooding where the field was under water for weeks, the 'hoppers took one harvest, hail took another...but the good thing about being organic is that, when our neighbours lost their shirts, at least we hadn't invested in any inputs. So even though we didn't make any money, we didn't lose any either...."



Artisan baker and organic grower Peyton Leavitt surveys her land.

A conventional grain grower approached the table at one point to ask about how to start the transition. He told me, "I have some friends who are organic. I don't know if they're making more money than me but they're having more fun. And in the end, that's the key."

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The organic farmers are making more money—as Janine Gibson, Past President of COG, told people who visited our booth—organic prairie farmers have higher profits than conventional. With field crops, organic costs per acre are much lower, and the yields only slightly lower than, or even equal to, conventional, which leads to a better bottom line for

organic farmers. But that's just the financial angle.

The organic growers who once farmed with chemicals told me about the other high costs of conventional farming—the sickness, the cancer, the miscarriages. And they told me about the changes in their farms since the transition. The new relationship with the soil. The return of the birds. The vibrant community they now belonged to.

When comparing Maritime to prairie farms, the acreage and crops may be different but the organic farmers made me feel right at home. Whether we grow on a city lot, a quarter-acre garden, or a section, we are all working towards the same goal—producing nutritious food in a way that is healthy for ourselves, our community and our environment.

—Janet Wallace
Editor
janet@cog.ca