

The Canadian Organic Grower

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Subscriptions/COG Membership

See page 37 for membership
information.

Production

Karyn Wright, Foxboro, Ontario

Printing

Shield Printing, Belleville, Ontario

The Canadian Organic Grower
is published by:

Canadian Organic Growers (COG)
323 Chapel St, Ottawa ON
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ISSN 1710-761X

The Canadian Organic Grower
Publications Mail #4076 8546

Deadline for articles:
January 15, April 15,
July 15 and October 15

Cost per issue: \$9.00

Volume 4, Number 2
Spring 2007

EDITORIAL

From flower to flower; from farmer to farmer

Twice a year Anil Gupta goes on a journey. For a week or so, he and his followers walk from village to village in the Indian countryside. It is a pilgrimage of sorts but not a religious one. It's the journey of the Honey Bee Network.

Honeybees fly from flower to flower. They don't harm the plants. Instead, they perform the critical role of passing pollen between plants—making essential connections. Likewise, in his travels, Gupta (the founder of India's Honey Bee Network) connects villagers as he seeks to find and share traditional knowledge and innovative rural inventions.

The network promotes the use of technology that is accessible to the poor, and beneficial for both communities and the environment. Honey Bee is very free in sharing the information and inventions it finds. It does, however, use intellectual property right laws to protect such findings from corporations that might try to patent the information.

When the wandering group arrives in a village, they meet with people of all ages. The elders receive gifts in recognition of knowledge they share. Children are encouraged to learn lessons from the past and to envision the future.

The Honey Bee cooks (who follow the walkers in a truck) prepare huge meals which are shared among all. At night, Gupta and his followers sleep in barns or on the floors of schools.

Honey Bee promotes biodiversity. Its catalogue lists a great number of uses for indigenous plants as food, medicine and natural pesticides. In biodiversity contests, students collect samples from as many different plants as they can find. In this way, biodiversity is catalogued cheaply and quickly while the youth develop a greater awareness of their landscape.

Small businesses using native plants have sprung up in Gupta's path. For example, one community started to produce a skin cream made from local plants; the villagers now have a source of income and are encouraged to protect native plant species.

The network also holds cooking contests using native plants as the main ingredients. The published winning recipes create a greater demand for, and pride in, native crops. These successes make it less likely that the farmers will succumb to the lure of genetically engineered cash crops (or to the pressure of agrichemical companies).

The rural technologies that Honey Bee celebrates are inex-

Cover photo: Between the administrative area of The Stop Community Food Centre and the Drop-In Centre in Toronto, a wonderful mural covers three walls. It was painted in 2006 by participants in a youth employment program. The mural portrays the field to table concept, from the community garden right through to the community kitchens and communal dining. The models for the characters were volunteers and staff involved in the programs. See story on page 22.

Photo credit: Katrina Simmons, 2020 Studios (www.2020studios.com)

pensive and relatively easy to produce using readily available materials. Examples include a bicycle-powered water pump; a medicinal poultice made from herbs; milk sprays to control viral diseases in crops; a modified pulley that allows someone to pause and rest while raising buckets of water from wells. My favourite is the “amphibious bicycle”—a bicycle retrofitted with rubber flotation devices that allows for easy access over flooded land.

Gupta does not just admire the new technology he finds but also honours the people behind it. He’s a professor at the Institute of Management at Ahmedabad but also a student of peasants. In his view, “the Indian soul resides in the wisdom of the poor.”

The villages involved in the network develop “cultural survival strategies.” One village in northern India, for example,

traditionally held many festivals during their cold winters. However, the monks decided to postpone the festivals until the summer so that they could attract tourists. But the local people were too busy working their fields in the summer to go to festivals, and tourists didn’t come to the poorly attended events. Winters became more dreary, particularly for the children. After a few years, the festivals were moved back to the winter. This provides an example of the need to protect not just plants and information, but also to protect culture from being diluted by commercial interests (by either corporations or Buddhist monks!).

When I first heard about the Honey Bee Network, I wanted to get involved. I love finding out how individuals solve common problems, whether it be the design of a milking stand, a crop

rotation that contributes both to soil health and farm income, or a way of threshing beans by hand or by foot.

In Canada, we can celebrate our innovative farmers and share their techniques. We can pass the information on during farm tours and conferences. I have found that often the most valuable exchanges occur during the coffee and lunch breaks, in the informal conversations between individuals that may or may not be stimulated by the guest speaker.

The cross-pollination of ideas can also occur in the pages of this magazine. Please let me know if you have ideas to share or know of farmers you think others should hear about.

If you want to learn more about the Honey Bee Network, see www.sristi.org.

—Janet Wallace
Editor

COG salutes Organic Heroes

Canadian Organic Growers is pleased to launch the “Organic Food Hero” awards. Starting in 2007, the awards will be offered annually to volunteers who have made significant contributions toward advancing the organic sector in Canada.

The categories and recipients for 2007 awards are as follows:

Organic Media Hero: Jill Eisen

This organic food hero is an author or journalist who has shown excellence in covering organic food issues at either a national or regional level. The award acknowledges the complexities inherent in covering organic issues with fairness.

The 2007 Organic Media Hero award was presented to **Jill Eisen** for her series “Organic Goes Mainstream” (www.cbc.ca/ideas/features/organics/index.html). Jill is a freelance writer for CBC’s Ideas. “Organics Goes Mainstream” presented solid research behind the organic issue in balanced fashion. Canadian Organic Growers applauds Jill’s work, which

communicated the complexity of organic issues in a way that is easily understandable and entertaining.

Organic Supporter Hero: Michael Stadlander

This organic food hero is a consumer-supporter of organic and local food systems. This award acknowledges and appreciates the role that consumer activists play in social change pertaining to food.

The 2007 Organic Supporter Hero award was presented to **Michael Stadlander** for his work as a chef in bringing local organic food to consumers. Michael is both an organic master chef and a farmer. He has championed organic food localism and has worked to build necessary connections between organic consumers and producers. Michael is best known for his farm just north of Toronto, which has turned into an eating experience with huge waiting lists.

Organic Organization Hero: Ann Slater

This food hero award recognizes an activist within Canada’s organic movement. With this award COG