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The Mystique of Organic Farming

By Hugh Martin, CCA-ON

How do they do it?

As one farmer put it, "It is just good farming without the chemicals." To many people, the fact that organic farmers choose not to use many of the convenient tools of crop and livestock production makes it different. Some see it as a return to the past. But, while it is a return to the basic principles of good crop and

livestock husbandry it is really a blend of traditional wisdom and the modern technology of equipment, modern non-GMO varieties, low risk pesticides, bio-control, etc. A good crop rotation is often said to be the foundation of successful organic farms.

Most large organic farms are required to be certified organic in order to market their products. Standards for organic were first

established almost 30 years ago and have now evolved to national organic regulations and standards in over 70 countries. Most criteria are more or less the same. I compare it to driving regulations that are largely the same wherever you go, but there are some details that vary between countries. In most areas the certification is delivered by third-party certification agencies.

The Canadian National Standard for Organic Agriculture was first approved in 1999 and revised in 2006. The standards include seven general principles for organic production:

1. Protect the environment, minimize soil degradation and erosion, decrease pollution, optimize biological productivity and promote a sound state of health.
2. Maintain long-term soil fertility by optimizing conditions for biological activity within the soil.
3. Maintain biological diversity within the system.
4. Recycle materials and resources to the greatest extent possible within the enterprise.
5. Provide attentive care that promotes the health and meets the behavioural needs of livestock.
6. Prepare organic products, emphasizing careful processing and handling methods in order to maintain the organic integrity and vital qualities of the products at all stages of production.
7. Rely on renewable resources in locally organized agricultural systems.

Most of these are basic principles that could be applied to any farm and most farms do many of these things instinctively as good business practice. Some of the key issues among these principles are to protect the environment, which of course is a constant struggle to minimize your environmental footprint while being able to profitably run a farm. A key to optimizing the biological system is to maintain (and build) soil organic matter. It is much easier to lose organic

matter than to build it. By using diverse crop rotations that include cover crops whenever you can, and recycling organic materials such as livestock manure and mulches into the soil on a regular basis, we feed the vast array of soil life including bacteria, fungi, earthworms, soil insects, etc. They build the soil structure that benefits our soils in so many ways!

Preventative health care works for both crops and livestock to avoid problems before they

happen. This takes planning and close attention to detail where management skills are the key to successful production, especially on organic farms. Knowing your markets and how to grow and process your product to meet the market requirements are also fundamental to the success of the farm operation.

The mystique of successful organic farming ... it is mostly just good farming.

Additional information can be obtained by visiting these sites:

- OMAFRA crops page <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/organic/organic.html>
- Organic Council of Ontario <http://www.organiccouncil.ca/>
- Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario www.efao.ca
- Canadian Organic Growers www.cog.ca
- Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada <http://www.oacc.info/>
- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada – Organic Food http://www.agr.gc.ca/index_e.php?s1=help-aide&s2=a-z&page=org
- Canadian Food Inspection Agency – Canada Organic Office <http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/orgbio/otfgtspbe.shtml>



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Hugh Martin is an Ontario CCA employed by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs as their Organic Crop Production Program Lead.

There are over 500 Certified Crop Advisers (CCA) in Ontario. Each CCA has demonstrated their knowledge about Ontario crop production by passing the required exams. In addition, they have the crop advisory experience, the education, the commitment to continuing education and have signed a comprehensive code of ethics, which places the grower's interests first.

This industry driven program helps ensure that Ontario crop producers are well served by those providing their crop production advice. This article was written by one of those CCA's.