

Ecological Farming in Ontario

VOL. 45 | ISSUE 3 | FALL 2024



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Canadian Wool

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The Prairie Farmer
and Rancher Forum



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Carole Lyne Laramée harvests some horsetail at a field day at New Leaf Health Centre in New Liskeard, June 14, 2024





What We Do

Established in 1979 by farmers for farmers, the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario (EFAO) is a membership organization that focuses on farmer-led education, research, and community building. EFAO brings farmers together so they can learn from each other and improve the health of their soils, crops, livestock, and the environment, while running profitable farm businesses.

Vision

We envision an Ontario where thriving ecological farms are the foundation of our food system, and where agriculture protects our resources, increases biodiversity, mitigates climate change, and cultivates resilient, diverse, equitable communities.

Mission

EFAO supports farmers to build resilient ecological farms and grow a strong knowledge sharing community.

Ecological Farming in Ontario

Ecological Farming in Ontario is published quarterly by EFAO as a benefit of membership to help keep farmers and supporters informed and in touch with one another through articles on relevant farming topics, current farmer-led research, upcoming events, and other news of interest.

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Deadline for Winter 2024 Issue: Oct. 15th

Help make *Ecological Farming in Ontario* a farmer's journal! Submit articles, photos, opinions and news to the editor, Laura Northey, at editor@efao.ca. We reserve the right to edit submissions for space and/or clarity.

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Dear EFAO members and friends,

It's field day season at EFAO! Farmers gathering on each others' farms to walk the fields and pastures and share questions, challenges and ideas: that's what EFAO is all about.

At this time of year, farms and gardens are brimming with activity and bounty, and there is so much to see and learn from one another. Check out page 7 for some photo highlights of recent field days, and keep your eyes peeled on EFAO Enews' for updates on events in your region.

Many of EFAO's programs are in full swing over the summer and fall. Farmer-researchers are busy conducting trials in collaboration with EFAO's Farmer-Led Research Program (learn about a no-till potato trial using mulch on page 14). EFAO's Small Grains Program just completed its 4th intake, supporting farmers to integrate a small grain and a legume cover crop into their rotation (the member profile of Andre Houle on page 5 features a program participant).

It's also the time of year when our focus starts to turn towards conference planning. We're excited to announce the dates and updated location for this year's conference: **December 4th and 5th in Kingston!** Please mark your

calendars and stay tuned for regular updates on keynotes, workshops and registration details. You'll find some more information on page 4. We love nothing more than receiving suggestions from EFAO members on workshop topics and potential presenters and working to bring those ideas to life. We know you're busy but if you have some burning questions or curiosities that you'd like to learn more about and explore with fellow growers at this year's conference, please do shoot a quick email over to conference@efao.ca.

Thank you all for everything you grow – from crops and food, to community and inspiration. It is such a pleasure and privilege for everyone at EFAO, to support this community.



Ali English,
Executive Director

Join us for the 2024 EFAO Conference in Kingston!

EFAO's 11th Annual Conference will take place at the Doubletree by Hilton in Kingston, December 4th and 5th.

The 2024 theme, "Interconnected" reflects the infinite and increasing symbiotic connections that occur throughout healthy ecosystems, as well as the parallel strength and solidarity that is experienced in human systems when diversity, community, and interdependence are valued and prioritized.

EFAO is currently seeking sponsors and exhibitors for the conference.

If you are interested in sponsoring or tabling at the trade show, please contact us at conference@efao.ca to receive the sponsorship package.



Programs and Services for Indigenous Growers

EVENTS:

Knowledge-sharing events and gatherings for and by Indigenous communities and food growers. Visit efao.ca/indigenous for more information and event listings.

MENTORSHIP:

EFAO can help link you with an experienced grower for a series of knowledge-sharing meetings by phone, online and/or in-person. Mentors will help guide new growers through the season, sharing their experience and insights.

SOIL TESTING:

If you are wondering about the fertility, nutrient balance, or health of the soil in your growing space but aren't sure where to start, EFAO can help. Support for soil testing is available for Indigenous growers and communities.

Have a question about EFAO's programs and services for Indigenous growers?

Please reach out to indigenous.outreach@efao.ca.

Welcome, Rachel!

Rachel Lachance supports the EFAO's Northern & Indigenous Programs through outreach, coordinating knowledge-sharing events, building strong partnerships and providing program support for the Indigenous Growers mentorship program. She lives off-grid on a 115-acre ecological farm in Timmins with her husband and 4 children.



Getting to Know Ferme Houle Farm

by André Houle

We are third and fourth generation farmers on the land my grandparents bought. The original farm was a typical family dairy operation until the 1960s, but they also grew potatoes. I grew up on the farm, but it wasn't until the early 1990s that I joined my dad and started cash crop farming.

We certified organic in 2021 after many years of conventional farming. The original reason for transitioning was purely financial. Like many farmers, I was working a full-time off-farm job to subsidize my farming addiction. Transitioning to organic forced me out of my comfort zone, and I quickly realised soil health was a major factor in growing crops — something I had never considered before.

Within a short 3-4 years, we went from a corn/soybean rotation and plowing every inch of the soil to growing wheat, rye, barley, peas, hairy vetch, red clover, buckwheat, oats, and fava beans along with corn and soybeans. We intercrop many of these crops in an effort to feed the soil biology, and we use cover crops to keep the soil covered as much as we



can. We are using roller-crimping techniques, no-till, minimal tillage and yes, we still plow — but only when necessary.

We grow and mill the crops we need for our animal feed ourselves.

Over the years we have added broilers, laying hens, turkeys, and hogs all on rotating pasture, and very recently have started our journey with beef using rotational grazing. Livestock remains the key to regenerative agriculture.

EFAO and Canadian Organic Growers (COG) have provided much needed support during our journey. We participated in the no-till potato trials and I appreciate the local farmer network that is always willing to provide valuable insights.

Our soil health is the determining factor for our success. Our ultimate goal is to provide the healthiest food with the smallest carbon footprint. We still face the same challenges as everyone else. For example, 2024 has been the wettest year in my 30+ years of farming. Last year was a very wet year, and we were hit with a Derecho (a type of wind storm) the previous year that did considerable damage. Our soil is not resilient to these extreme events yet but we have noticed a significant reduction in both wind and water erosion due to our recent change in tillage practices.

It's not all sunshine and lollipops! We've had some serious crop failures as we experiment with different trials. We've learned that too much vetch in the



rye will smother the crop to the point where it cannot be harvested, no-tilled soybeans in fall rye on light sand will suffer from lack of moisture, yellow peas intercropped with a small grain in light soil do not get enough moisture, we cannot harvest tillage radish without special equipment, etc... There is a true "high" when one of our trials work and we can replicate it the following year (like intercropping peas with small





grains on heavier soils, roller crimping no-till soybeans in a fall rye/hairy vetch field, etc).

I feel our farm has recently turned a corner. Even with the challenging weather this year, we observe the difference in our soil's resilience. We have diversified to the point that profitability is still a possibility despite our cash crop disappointment, and we are helping address some of the climate issues. Our carbon footprint is one of the lowest in farming today. We save our seed from the previous year, grow the crop without importing fertilizers or pesticides, harvest and mill the grains that we feed to our livestock onsite until we process the animals at local abattoirs. We sell the meat and prepared meals at local farmer's markets.

Participating in the Small Grains Program with EFAO was helpful to us in terms of getting started with that kind of rotation without taking on quite so much financial risk. The yellow peas/small grains intercropping that we tried first did terribly in light soil, but really well in heavier soil. We would have taken a much bigger loss if we hadn't been in the program. Diversifying what we grow also means that we diversify the crops that we derive income from, which makes the farm more resilient in seasons where, for example, the price of

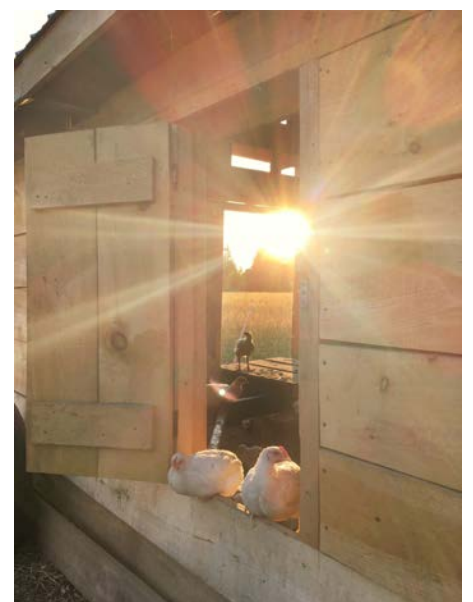
one particular crop is down, or there is a crop failure.

The next steps for us include expanding our cover crop seed operation, growing our food offerings at the local farmer's markets and possibly opening a small feed mill to provide organic feed.

We realise organic isn't for everyone. Transitioning wasn't easy and the marketing of our products involved a huge learning curve, but it worked for us. If anyone is thinking of transitioning to organic, reach out to an organic farmer. I haven't met one that isn't

willing to share all the knowledge they have gained. ■

André Houle and his family run *Ferme Houle Farm*, a multi-generational, family-owned and operated farm in Curran, Ontario. They started using regenerative agricultural practices in 2018, obtained organic certification for the first time in 2021, and now produce a multitude of products for both human and livestock consumption.



Early Summer Field Days

New Leaf Health Centre Field Day, New Liskeard

June 14, 2024



EFAO Staff Retreat

June 12, 2024



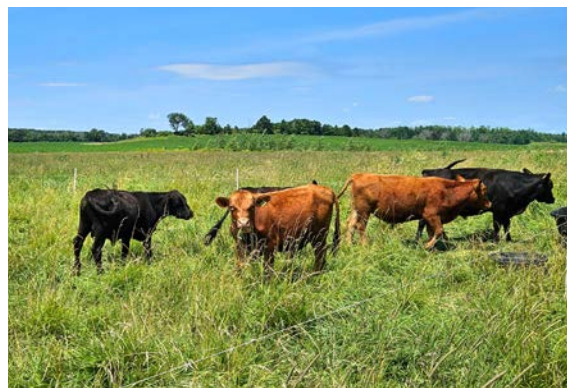
Salad Production at the New Farm

July 24, 2024



Kirkview Farms Rotational Grazing Field Day

July 20, 2024



Turn a Forage Wagon into a Chicken Tractor

by Bob Halliday

An inexpensive and useful way of getting an easily movable chicken tractor is by converting an old forage wagon. These are sturdily built with a strong running gear and roof. Since many dairy farms have converted to bunker silos, these wagons have been abandoned and can be had cheaply.

Using an acetylene torch, one can carefully cut the mounting bolts of the unloading mechanism and lastly the apron chains from the rear and the steel work should fall off. These parts can then be loaded for scrap and bring over \$100 against your purchase. Next you can build a stair and access platform and enclose the front with a door and chicken wire. The wooden walls of the wagon easily accept old windows with summer screens, light receptacles and



nesting boxes. A feeder hangs from the roof and another under the wagon. We mounted split rail roosts on 2x4s and hinged these to the floor so they could be swung to the other side for cleanout.

We surround the wagon with Gallagher net fence powered by a solar charger. When planning a move we close the wagon at twilight and then move it to a new grazing area. In winter



we leave the wagon facing south and have a heat bulb over a water dish, and put the interior lights on a timer which comes on around 5 am. This has worked well for years for us and our 30 laying hens, and could hold more.

Bob Halliday and his wife **Susan** and their family steward *Liveoak Farm* in Lambton County.

A Farmer's Take on the Prairie Farmer and Rancher Forum

In early 2024, Farmers for Climate Solutions brought together 36 producers from across Canada's prairie provinces for a citizen's assembly to develop grassroots policy recommendations for prairie agriculture. The Forum's mandate was to examine issues and opportunities related to climate change and enhance sustainable agriculture production on the Canadian Prairies. The goal was to develop recommendations for a strong, sustainable, and prosperous Prairie agriculture sector.

EFAO interviewed Garry Richards, one of the ranchers who participated in the Forum, about his experience taking part in the citizen's assembly, and why he thinks it was a success.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

EFAO: First, can you tell us a bit about your farm, and how you got started?

GR: We're on my family's farm in Saskatchewan, which was first homesteaded by my grandfather in 1902.

It's around 6000 acres. I grew up here. When it was homesteaded, it was like all the other farms: mixed. They had cattle, maybe some other livestock, and grain. Back in the 70s, when I was a kid, my father sold all the cattle. So I grew up as a grain farmer.

It turns out I have asthma and allergies, so living on a grain farm was a problem for me. So I went to university and became a pharmacist, and then owned a pharmacy for 10 years. I ended up going to Africa for a year, to work in a mission hospital, and that's where I met my wife, who was from Alabama. She had no background in farming, and was trained as a nurse, but once we got married we decided to come back to the farm and give it a try. At the end of two years, we saw nothing but opportunities, so we decided to stick around. That's when we bought some cows.

EFAO: What was your inspiration for changing the way the farm operated? How did you know you wanted to make those changes?

GR: The biggest thing that helped shape our farm was taking a Holistic



Management (HM) course in 2003. At that point, we had cows calving in January and February. The idea of working in sync with nature really hit home with us. We didn't need to be calving in -40 weather anymore.

The other thing we got out of HM was a goal. A life goal, a family goal, a farm goal. That really helped my wife, because at the time what we were doing didn't make any sense to her. We could have been working in our professions, and doing very well, but instead, we





were labouring away on the farm. I kept telling her, this is the best life there is. It's the best place to raise kids. Once we had goals in mind that weren't only about money, she could look at them and remember what we were working towards. And in the end, she totally agrees. It's the best life.

Mentors were also huge for me. That was just the way it happened to fall together — we didn't even seek them out. In 2009 we grew our first cover crop, and that's the year I first heard Gabe Brown speak, and he became a mentor for me. I'd go visit him in Bismarck, and talk to him on the phone and by email. It changed how we farmed.

EFAO: How did you get involved with on-farm research and data collection?

GR: Once we started working with Gabe, we started quantifying more things, like measures of soil health. I wanted to prove to myself that in five years, I could increase organic matter by one per cent, using cover crops, holistic management principles, and all the rest. So we benchmarked a piece of land, and five years later, it had increased by exactly

one per cent. So then we just kept doing it. Research became a part of what we do. Right now, we're involved with the Living Labs program, we were in the General Mills regenerative agriculture pilot program, and we've been involved with

a number of other studies with the University of Saskatchewan and Alberta. We're compiling a huge amount of on-farm data. That has continued since 2009, and so far, all the results have been positive.

EFAO: How has your operation changed over the years?

GR: We started as a grain farm, and then we became a mixed farm, but now we're a ranch. We don't grow grain anymore. We grow a little bit of corn for forage, and some cover crops, but I'm trying to get rid of that as well.

My wife and I have 3 kids — our youngest just graduated high school. Our philosophy is, you have to go away and get some education and some life experience. So they're away learning, and right now we have an intern from France for 12 weeks here on the farm. We've had employees, and have a couple now. But going forward, we're also just trying to just make our farm operate on its own more. And that's a big learning experience. It's neat to realize what we don't have to do.

We're also going to more of a perennial system. I like to say I am a proponent of the cheap, lazy way of farming. Don't spend money and do the least amount of work possible, because that's what nature does. With our cover crops, we started out doing annual crops.

So we eventually got to a two year cover crop cycle, where you seed in the spring, and put in biennials like sweet clover or hairy vetch. That was easier. The next step beyond that is perennials. Why do I even need to seed at all?

Part of the regenerative thing is minimization of inputs — fertilizer and herbicides and insecticides and fungicides, and all the work it involves. We just let the animals do more.

EFAO: How did you get involved in the Prairie Farmer and Rancher Forum? What was it like to be a part of something like that?

GR: Well I had never heard anything about the Forum, even though I was already involved with Farmers for Climate Solutions as a cover cropping mentor with the FaRM program. I was impressed with how they had the government's ear and have had some success in shaping some policy. But it was actually one of the coaches from the General Mills pilot program who sent an email around and suggested that farmers in the project consider participating. And a researcher we are working with at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada also suggested we might want to throw our names in.

Overall it was a very good experience. It's interesting to be in a room with 40 people, a certain percentage of whom are quite polarized. To get consensus,



there were going to be some fireworks. Thankfully, we had a process in place and people there to help us navigate that. It was very rewarding and fulfilling to accomplish consensus in that group.

But it's not that it wasn't challenging. I'm on one end of the spectrum, with those who are concerned about ecology and the environment. And then there's some that ask, "Why do you want to protect native areas, and wetlands? What's wrong with tillage?" We learned a lot about people, and ourselves. We had lots of different experts come in, and we had exposure to a lot of different ideas, and it was a great place to network. I made friends that I still keep in touch with after the Forum.

EFAO: Why do you think it was so important for this group to come together the way it did and produce some real, positive outcomes?

GR: There are probably two reasons it was important to me. One is things like desertification happening across the globe. I think we're turning the great plains of North America into a desert. Of course, you can turn it into a debate about climate change, but at the end of the day, we're better off asking ourselves, "what are we gonna do about it?" And I think there's lots we can do about it.

At the Forum it seemed like we had to shift our focus off of climate, towards stewardship. Once we did that, everybody calmed down and got along better. That's how we got to consensus building. Rather than pit one side against the other, which happens so much in today's society, we started with the fact that at the end of the day, we're all just people. In this case, people who are stewarding land on the prairies. We have a lot of common ground. It turned out that we were all concerned about our ecosystems, and our land. We're farmers. We love the land. And we care that the future generation can carry forward this way of life. That's the common ground. There's a lot of pride in all of us, around that.

The other reason it's important is policy. I think there is a sentiment amongst

farmers, of "I don't wanna be told how to farm and what I can and can't do. I want to come up with my own ideas." And there are a lot of things we *can* do on our own, that we don't need government for. Of course, I'm not saying there's no need for government intervention at all, because at some point we have to stop the drainage, and not just wipe out every wetland and bush. Policy has its place, because in many cases, it's not just my land that is affected — removing wetlands affects everyone, even folks in the city. But farmers can figure out a lot of it, and we can be proactive and take our solutions to the government. Farmers for Climate Solutions did that. They took *solutions* to government, instead of letting government bring suggestions to farmers. And that's how we got OFCAF [the On-Farm Climate Action Fund].

EFAO: Which of the recommendations from the report were most important to you?

GR: A lot of the recommendations were important to me, and the principles that we agreed to were really important too. There are a lot of organizations and networks supported by industry right now, including chemical companies. And they do a great job of networking. But farmer-driven groups like the Forum, where farmers can have more input into the research and policy, are more rare.

We had several experts at the Forum, plus about 10 farmers who had a good knowledge about regenerative agriculture. Those of us on the regenerative side didn't agree with a number of things that were being said. But we knew there were ways to accomplish similar goals, and also achieve a bunch of other goals, without necessarily agreeing on everything.



Getting that network together and connecting people can help with that. So the principles of farmer and rancher leadership and collaboration amongst different groups was very important.

Beyond that, there was the stuff about livestock and grazing management. How to integrate livestock into grain systems. How to preserve habitat when working with livestock and grazing animals. How to improve soil health, and add diversity to crop rotations. Those recommendations were important, because the cattle herd is shrinking. There's a generation that doesn't know anything about cattle, and who feel like grain farming is the way to go. And the government, through risk management programs and financial supports, seems to support grain farming much more than livestock. If I have to choose between being well-insured as a grain farmer, through government programs, or having poor (at best) risk management as a livestock producer, and I'm young and have a lot of debt, I might just choose to be a grain farmer. So those systems and supports need to change, if we are going to improve soil health.

We also talked about nitrogen management. That's a great way to reduce carbon emissions and achieve soil health, and probably improve farm profitability, which is a different kind of sustainability, and it matters.



were really flexible, and even changed the focus of the Forum a bit, after the first meeting. They understood that we had to go with the temperature of the room.

When you identify that common ground, then you can build on it, and at the end of the day, even with the diversity of age, gender, type of farming, geographical location we had, we all agreed on so much, and nobody left there hating anybody. A lot of us have stayed in touch. That

says a lot about the whole process, and the leaders as well.

After the second meeting, we had this rough list of recommendations, and they said, okay, go home, and if you can, sit down with some neighbours and discuss their opinion. You don't have to persuade them or anything, just listen. So I did that with my 80-year-old neighbour, who has been a very progressive and successful modern farmer. And I said, "Here you go, what's your feedback on these?"

And when it came to the natural habitat recommendations, his response was, "Why?"

So that's the extreme. To him, those parts have no value. But yet I know guys who were there who love tillage and do lots of it. They own excavators and Cats and all the rest of it. And somehow through this process, they agreed to

those recommendations. Which was surprising. A handful of people could have blocked them, and didn't. I think that's because we all started to realize, "I can't get everything the way I want it. So I gotta give some, and look at the bigger picture." Are we going to try and come up with something we can move forward with, or are we just gonna argue over one point and drag it all down?

The tone of the whole Forum was to build something and be constructive. And I think that's why it worked the way it did.

EFAO: So, what happens next? What do you hope these recommendations will help accomplish?

GR: We released the 36 recommendations officially on June 5th with a media launch, and now we need to get the word out there. We want government, industry, academia, other farmers, and other farm organizations to recognize and work with these recommendations. Maybe we get people around the table more, to discuss these issues — if that's what happens, that's progress. It's an example of how farmers can work together, find common ground, and build consensus.

Hopefully this will help to shape policy, rather than have it handed to us. ■

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To learn more about the *Prairie Farmer and Rancher Forum*, or to read the full report, please visit the [Farmers for Climate Solutions website](#).

EFAO: Why do you think the group was able to reach consensus on so many recommendations? What was it about the gathering that made that possible?

GR: It helped that we had Mary Smillie as the lead. The facilitator is pretty important, and Mary is small, but she's tough. Not everyone can do what she did. I couldn't. And then we had the co-leaders, Ian [McCreary] and Gordon [Bacon]. And then bringing in experts, some of whom I didn't necessarily agree with, but that's all right. You gotta listen.

I think the "fist to five" thing, so not voting yes or no on things, but sharing gradients of agreement, was quite helpful. And I think we learned that we can't all have our way. We've all got to give some, here and there. When we found common ground, we had some breakthroughs. If we didn't have that framework, and those key people, I don't think we would have done as well. They



Rob Read's No-Till Potato Variety Trials

by Sarah Larsen

Rob Read, Julie Walter and their three children live near Dutton, Ontario, on 50 acres of land they call Willow Creek Permaculture Farm. Here, they farm and run a learning pod/homeschooling enrichment program for children aged 6-12 and several day camps in the summer. On the land, Rob and Julie rotationally graze cattle and kunekune pigs, and raise turkey and chickens. They also grow fruit and nut trees, perennial vegetables and herbs, and tend large annual vegetable gardens for home sustenance, research, and breeding.

For the past several years, Rob has planted potatoes using the deep mulch method that was originally advocated by Ruth Stout in the 1950s.

“For those unfamiliar with Stout, she was a garden writer who wrote several books that are well worth your time,” encourages Rob. “She advocated growing almost all crops with very heavy mulches of spoiled hay.” Rob has had success with this system, with the addition of tarping on top of the mulch over winter. Of course, this is not the ideal method for all crops, especially those requiring warmer soil or requiring a fine tilth.

Potatoes are one of the crops most suited for the mulch method. “To plant” says Rob, “push any previous mulch aside, and plant seed potatoes on the surface of the soil. Then apply mulch to a depth of 1-2 feet”. He notes that “as the mulch settles throughout the season, additions of more mulch are sometimes necessary”. At harvest, simply push the mulch aside and harvest potatoes without any digging.

A system that requires so little effort without soil disturbance seems like a

miracle, but as Rob points out “deep mulch methods tend to produce lower yields compared to hilling and digging” – highlighting a tradeoff of this simple method.

Even with this tradeoff, deep mulch is Rob's preferred way of growing potatoes, and he was curious about how different varieties performed with the method. With the help of EFAO's Farmer-Led Research Program, Rob designed a research trial to test 28 varieties of potatoes in three replicate blocks using 12-24" of spoiled hay mulch. Throughout the season, he weeded as needed, which was minimal.

In the fall, Rob harvested all replicates of the 28 varieties separately, and weighed them to obtain a total weight and marketable weight for each variety. For marketable weight, he excluded potatoes that had greening (especially where chickens had disturbed the mulch!), vole damage, or large growth cracks. In all, Rob took 84 (28 varieties x 3 blocks) measurements for total weight and 84 measurements for marketable weight.

“Once the data was in, we could see that there was a lot of variability among replicates”, says Rob. “For example, Amarose had relatively high yields in two replicates (887 and 839 g/plant), and a relatively low yield (303 g/plant) in the third replicate,” he explains. This type of variability made it hard to discern differences among varieties with statistical confidence.



“Due to the variability, there was only one variety that I could reliably call “top yielding,” a handful that were consistently low yielding, and the majority in the middle,” he notes. Rob found that Chieftain was the top yielding variety across all three replicates, whereas Huckleberry Gold, Yukon Gold, Kennebec, Sangre, Purple Viking, and Dakota Pearl offered the lowest yields. The others were somewhere in between high and low, but without the statistical confidence to rank them beyond that.

Layering in-field observations with the statistical tests, Rob ranked the potato varieties, as shown in **Table 1**.



Table 1. Yield and marketable yield of the 28 potato varieties Rob tested in this trial, listed in order of average marketable yield per plant. Note that Rob placed some edible (and sellable) potatoes in the unmarketable category, such as those with growth cracks that typically come from fast growth due to heavy rains.

VARIETY	TYPE	AVERAGE TOTAL YIELD (G/PLANT)	AVERAGE MARKETABLE YIELD (G/PLANT)	YIELD NOTES
CHIEFTAIN	Red/White	1,113	908	Overall Best Yield; Best Red/White
RUSSIAN BLUE	Blue/Blue	1,001	815	Highest Yield, Blue/Blue
BELLANITA	Yellow/Yellow/ (Fingerling)	968	751	Highest Yield, Yellow/Yellow
PURPLE MAJESTY	Blue/Blue	875	730	Second Highest Yield, Blue/Blue
BRIDGET	Yellow/White	1,026	670	Highest Yield, Yellow/White
ORCHARD HILL ROSE	Red/White	643	595	Runner-up, Red/White
AMAROSA	Red/Red	676	589	Highest Yield, Red/Red
AGRIA	Yellow/Yellow	804	574	Second Highest Yield, Yellow/Yellow
GREEN MOUNTAIN	Tan/White	611	547	Highest Yield, Tan/White
NORLAND	Red/White	655	519	Runner-up, Red/White
SUPERIOR	Yellow/White	550	491	Runner-up, Yellow/White
OLD FASHION RED'	Red/White	570	470	Runner-up, Red/White
BALLERINA	Yellow/Yellow	457	448	Runner-up, Yellow/Yellow
CARIBE	Light Purple/ White	660	441	Highest Yield, Light Purple/White
FRENCH FINGERLING	Fingerling; Red/ Cream	704	438	Runner-up, Fingerling
ROKO	Red/White	587	411	Runner-up, Red/White
PINK FIR APPLE	Fingerling; Pink/ Yellow	470	396	Runner-up, Fingerling
RUSSET	Russet; Brown/ White	442	388	
ALTA ROSE	Red/Cream with pink	402	373	
GOLD RUSH	Russet; Light Brown/White	561	358	
NICOLA	Yellow/Yellow	567	324	Runner up, Yellow/Yellow
EXCELLENCY	Yellow/Pale Yellow	504	314	
HUCKLEBERRY GOLD	Purple/Yellow	349	298	Lowest Yield
YUKON GOLD	Yellow/Yellow	453	290	Lowest Yield
KENNEBEC	Yellow/White	473	254	Lowest Yield
SANGRE	Red/White	351	195	Lowest Yield
PURPLE VIKING	Mottled purple and red/White	242	194	Lowest Yield
DAKOTA PEARL	Pale yellow/ White	269	145	Lowest Yield

Rob selected his favourites largely based on overall yields, but not exclusively. “Because we grow mostly for our family,

overall yields were more important to us than marketable yields because potatoes with growth cracks are completely

fine to eat—and we didn’t see a lot of greening”, he says.



Chieftain, the top performing variety in this trial.



Pink Fir Apple. Beautiful, but very fiddly to clean.



A row unmulched and ready to weigh.

“We also want to grow a variety of colours in the future, so we selected favourites based on the ones that did best in each colour group,” he continues.

Finally, Rob included Nicola because he observed that it was actually higher yielding than recorded, but was probably miscounted because it was grown beside a very similar looking potato. For this reason, he wants to reassess it in future years.

“When growing potatoes for market this way,” stresses Rob, “protection from voles is paramount. In order of perceived importance, the methods we employed for vole deterrence were a device called a sonic spike, which is marketed to get rid of moles and available in local hardware stores; cats to hunt the voles; and planting various alliums such as onions and garlic around potato plantings, which are said to dissuade voles from crossing them.”

“Of course, greening is another issue to watch with mulch methods, especially in lighter-skinned varieties,” says Rob. “It seemed less pronounced in red-skinned varieties, and hardly noticed at all on blue/purple-skinned varieties,” he noted.

Maintaining a steady level of mulch all season can help with preventing greening, as can isolating the plantings from free-range poultry that have a tendency to toss the mulch around.

After this study, Rob is still a big fan of the no-till method for potatoes—even with the potential for lower yields. He



A heap of French Fingerling.



Bellenita waiting to be weighed.



The ‘kingdom’ of Purple Majesty.



Potato piles ready to weigh.

encourages other growers to try the method if it makes sense for their operation. “If you don’t have access to traditional potato harvesting equipment, the labour savings with the deep mulch method alone can be huge,” he encourages. And he adds, “to make up for lower yields, multi-coloured potatoes could be packaged together as ‘rainbow potatoes,’ especially to customers who are interested in nutrient-dense food!”

You can read Rob’s full report in the [EFAO Research Library](#). ■

Sarah Larsen is EFAO’s Research & Small Grains Program Director and also supports soil health components of EFAO’s education programs. She holds a Ph.D. in Soil Microbial Ecology from Iowa State University, and along with her partner and their daughter, tends the land that they call Three Ridges Ecological Farm near Aylmer, Ontario.

A Q&A with Jenessa and Micheal of Little Farm That Could



by Angel Beyde

Jenessa of Little Farm That Could generously shared about the farming journey that took her and her husband Micheal from Winnipeg, New York and Toronto back yards to a farmers market to a small parcel of land outside Campbellford, Hastings County. The biggest transformation of the last year has been to deepen their commitment to localization and tap into as many local networks and relationships as possible, helping them thrive and grow without arduous 2:00 A.M. commutes to Toronto markets.

EFAO: Please introduce us to your farm, Jenessa! Can you tell us about your and Micheal's journey from working in the arts to becoming farmers? How did you end up in Hastings County /Campbellford?

JENESSA: When I was in high school and university I was a dancer and I left Winnipeg to study nutrition at Ryerson [now Toronto Metropolitan University]. I became turned off from going the dietician route and was really inspired by food systems studies, where it was encouraged to get out into the world and do hands-on work. This eventually led to managing a Toronto farmers market, where I met Micheal, who was one of vendors. I had a big crush on him. After a few months of dating, Micheal invited me to move up to the farm (which he had already bought) and we never looked back. At 27 years old, I didn't know much about local food, or what's in season — there was so much to learn from the farmers at the market. I eventually ended up working as an apprentice on Wheelbarrow Farm where I learned a ton about veggie growing,



but it also sparked my love for flower farming as well.

Mike was a visual artist in New York. Watching nature documentaries while he worked really sparked his interest to do something better for the environment. He did the Ryerson Urban Farming course, learned about Rainwater Management, and eventually started backyard gardening at a friend's place, which kicked off his love of farming, as well as taking JM Fortier's online course and working at a farm in Uxbridge. The lure of the Havelock area and Nonna's pasta Sundays with his large extended Italian family was strong, though. Mike

ended up finding our farm not far from the amazing enclave where he spent his summers growing up, which I like to call Little Italy on the Trent River. It's a magical place to spend a summer afternoon!

EFAO: How did you decide to offer seedlings and cut flowers, in addition to your CSA? What was your journey like to eventually land on this focus?

JENESSA: Our journey to where we are now basically came from being very burnt out. We had some amazing Toronto markets, but it did mean getting up at 2 am (St. Lawrence market



starting at 5 am and then also vending at Brickworks at 8 am) and we would get home at 4 pm. Sometimes we would take a nap in the car to be able to make it home, especially when we would sometimes be harvesting the night before until 11 pm. Sales were great and we loved our customers (many of them came every single week!), but it was exhausting and not sustainable, a big hit to the adrenal glands and cortisol. We wanted to find a local way of doing our farm business. Also, when we got the St Lawrence market spot, we were filling the shoes of Kind Organics, so we could only bring microgreens and salads for the first two years. We grew tomatoes and other veggies only for ourselves, to get better at growing. I really wanted more freedom to grow other things and to be creative.

When we got our spot at Brickworks, flowers started pulling — people really liked them and came back for them. 2023 was our first year of localizing, and we were inspired by a local eco-florist who is part of a collective. Beth (Smells Like Flowers) does Toronto weddings and asked if we would wholesale to a florist — we were surprised to see that the prices were the same as retail, which would make this doable for us. Selling to a niche, florist collective has been a really strong outlet for us and they love that they can ask for specific flowers

to grow that make them stand out as artists.

EFAO: Can you tell us about how you market and sell your CSA, seedlings and cut flowers?

JENESSA: For our flowers, I upload the flowers to an online platform so florists can pick what they like. Monday I harvest and Mike is in the veggie gardens. Then Mike drives the flowers down on Tuesday or Wednesday, to drop off and then comes home. There's no waste, I only harvest what's ordered. August to October is great for weddings, with sales in the range of \$2,000 / week. Beginning of July is always a lull, but the rest of the season averages around \$1,000 / week. I don't have to bouquet anything, so labour is much less. I am happiest as a grower and learning to be the best grower I can be. I see more value in symbiosis, for example with the florist collective, than in trying to do everything myself.

For the CSA we observed and listened to our community. We have a small but loyal CSA (20 people) and the customers loved it but were getting burnt out by mid-season picking up their CSA Friday after work. This year we started doing delivery in the Trent Hills area and the route is easy, about 60 - 90 minutes (some customers are 1 minute apart!) and the customers are so grateful to get delivery. Everyone is happy! We also



deliver to a mom and pop style family-owned grocery store — there is a great produce manager there who used to be a chef, and he loves our salad greens.

Our local Campbellford Farmers Market has also picked up a lot with some amazing vendors, like our neighbours Hello Farm, and sales are great, in the \$600 / week range. Overall, when we did the math on what we spent driving to Toronto, with all the fees and costs and time, we are making the same profit as before we localized. This area is very aware of supporting local and supporting good food.

2024 was our first year for seedlings! We noticed in 2023 that by the end of summer sales really dipped by as much as 50%, because so many local people had gardens of their own — which gave us the inspiration to start selling seedlings. Our first consignment rack





we brought to the local grocery store this spring sold out in two days and we had good sales at the Farmers Market. On farm, the first weekend we opened the greenhouse no one came, but the last weekend a lot more people showed up. For 2025, we're planning to ask the grocery store ahead of time how much of each seedling they would like.

EFAO: What next steps do you envision for your farm? And what do you imagine for your farm further in the future?

JENESSA: We just shrunk the farm from a half to a third acre which helped us condense our production but grow just as much. Last winter Lean Farming was the big inspiration for Mike. It's so easy to accumulate stuff and junk on the farm. It takes up your mental space. What's that worth? Ben Hartman inspired us to keep the farm clean and organized and simplify down to what you actually need to do your work and to keep as local as possible to serve your area. Mike is hoping to increase our CSA to 40 members on this smaller production footprint.

Collaborating with Beth from Smells Like Flowers has been great, we started hosting flower workshops together and the last ones all filled up, folks coming out for a fun day with friends. Beth is 10 years older and has so much experience in the industry, so it's like having a mentor who encourages me to try things. Beth has a strong sense of what to



charge and how to market, for example through Instagram.

EFAO: What brings you joy, inspires you, and keeps you smiling each day? What advice would you give to other young farmers starting out?

JENESSA: Staying on the farm and being local, serving our community, brings us joy. That is what we are inspired by – getting to know the clientele out here, it's grounding, makes us feel secure to be able to provide what they are looking for. Also, collaboration is a part of flower farming that everyone should have their eyes on, it gives you a lot of strength if

you don't have to be the grower and the florist.

Follow your gut and follow your heart with what is best for your business. Follow your instincts on what you want to grow, what you want your business and sales to be.

Farming needs to be fun as well. You have to keep morale up. ■

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Good Things Take Time

The Story of Grey Wolf Gardens, the Ininew Friendship Centre and The Cultural Grounds Garden Harvest Program



by Luke Dinan

Like all good things, the process of getting our farm started in Cochrane took time.

A lot of time.

I started working for my first farm — Fresh City — in the summer of 2011 when I was 19, and by the end of that season I knew there was nothing else I wanted to do but have my own farm and dedicate my life to growing good food for myself, my family and my community.

Eight years and five farms later, I was finally ready to get started on the huge task of building a farm from scratch on a piece of raw land. My wife and I had a converted office trailer with a wood stove to live in, a 2008 Ford Escape to drive, a vision for what we wanted out of our lives and the determination to keep working until we got it. In December of 2019, we arrived in Cochrane with our last load of belongings, lit a fire in the wood stove and settled into our new home.

As one might expect, things didn't go according to plan. What one might *not* expect is that the whole world would shut down due to a global pandemic. But such was the spring of 2020. As we watched history unfold before our eyes, we couldn't help but wonder what other unexpected turns our path towards building a farm would take. One day, while driving into town for supplies, I happened down one of those turns, and it forever changed the trajectory of our farm, our business and our community.

As I was driving I noticed a field full of willow, poplar and spruce. Nestled into the trees — almost hidden from view — was the unmistakable shape of

a teepee. Then another, and then a third type of structure I wasn't familiar with but would come to learn is called a chatpatwan. Obviously, there was something interesting going on here. But it didn't seem appropriate to just pull over and start wandering around. I decided that I would wait until I saw someone on the property who I could speak to. Again, as with many good things, this took time.

A year later, it finally happened.

In the late spring of 2021, as I was driving by the property, I saw a woman standing in the field. I hit the breaks, pulled to the side of the road, and ran over to introduce myself.

Her name was Mary Jane Archibald.

Mary Jane worked for the Ininew Friendship Centre (IFC). She explained that this property was the IFC's Cultural Grounds. She took me on a tour, and described what each of the buildings was and what they were used for. She explained that the property was used by members of the Native community to conduct ceremonies and to engage in their traditional practices, like smoking geese, butchering moose or tanning hides. Then she took me to a spot just outside the area with all the buildings. "I would really like to put gardens here," she said, "but none of us at the Friendship Centre have any experience with that kind of thing. So I



just put it out to the Creator, and asked that the knowledge find us."

Thus, the Cultural Grounds Garden Harvest program was born.

That first year we started off slow — we put a few beds in, and laid out our pathways. We were figuring out the logistics as we went — where was water coming from? Where were we going to store tools and materials? What were we planting and where?



The soil was heavy clay, compacted and very low in organic matter. We started adding compost and mulch to the beds. We put the tiller away and brought out the broad fork. We took our time and adjusted accordingly. And over time, the gardens grew. We put up a caterpillar tunnel for the cucumbers and tomatoes, added more beds and more paths. We doubled in size, and then doubled again.

By the 2023 season, we were offering a 16 week CSA-style program to 20 families within the Friendship Centre's network. We started running workshops for community members and school children as well as garden tours and volunteer days. The Gardens had become a beautiful and abundant place where people were able to connect more deeply with the soil and with their food, to learn about where food comes from and how it is grown, and to participate in growing food that they were then able to take home and enjoy.

In just a few short years, what was once a field of willows, grasses and legumes growing on heavy compacted clay soils has become a lush network of gardens filled with deep friable and fertile soil, connected by wood chip paths and full of healthy vigorous vegetables. To the North of the vegetable gardens is a food forest, with a mixed canopy of edible and medicinal plants, ranging from ground covers to full size trees. The food forest includes fruit trees, such as apples, plums, and pears; berries like raspberries, black berries and currants; and other exciting food plants like grapes and hazelnuts!

In addition to the vegetable gardens and food forest, there





is an installation of raised planter boxes filled with flowers and medicinal and culinary herbs so that even our most fragile elders are still able to enjoy the sights and smells of the Gardens without having to bend over.

The Cultural Grounds Garden Harvest program has become one of the mainstays of our farm business. It is a special and important program that we are honoured to be a part of. The Gardens themselves have become a place of flourishing. A place where the gifts of Creation are fully on display. And a place that people of all ages – from babies to great-grandparents – are able to gather and engage in one of the most fundamental aspects of our shared humanity – food. ■

Luke and Eva Dinan run Grey Wolf Gardens, an organic small-scale mixed vegetable farm, in Cochrane ON. They provide fresh produce to their northern community including running the Garden Harvest program for the Ininew Friendship Centre.

Sheep, Shepherd & Land: Stories from Small Farms Reinvigorating Canadian Wool

by Angel Beyde

“This book is dedicated to anyone who has been scared to death of doing something new or hard but decided to do it anyway.”

Anna Hunter

When considering what breed of sheep to get as a brand-new, small scale land steward, slowly building our diversified farm, I’ve set my sights on Icelandic sheep, in large part because they are known to be a hardy and thrifty triple purpose heritage breed with lustrous wool as well as excellent milk and meat. I’m super inspired by folks who are finding ways to use their flock’s wool clip, from innovative mulching practices to duvet fillings, insulation and collaborations with wool artists. That said, wool as an agricultural product is often overlooked. On countless sheep farms across the continent, farmers struggle to sell their flocks’ wool for enough to even cover the cost of shearing. Many farmers end up composting, burning or tossing their wool clips in the absence of a strong domestic wool industry. It wasn’t always like this! In Eastern Manitoba, Treaty One Territory, Anna Hunter, sheep farmer on [Long Way Homestead](#), wool educator and mill owner, is working to rebuild resiliency in our small and medium scale fibre economy through advocacy, research and education.

In *Sheep, Shepherd & Land: Stories from Small Farms Reinventing Canadian Wool*, Anna Hunter, with photographer

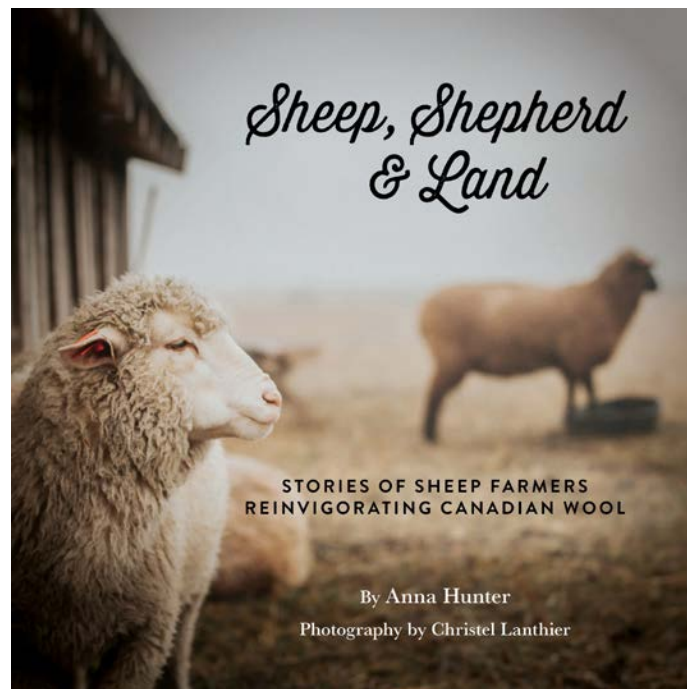
and collaborator Christel Lanthier, sets out to explore a dozen inspiring sheep farms across Turtle Island from British Columbia to the Maritimes to find answers to what it will take to reinvigorate our domestic wool industry and to help more farmers find sheep breeds that thrive in their regional climate and land base. Each farm profiled features a specific breed of sheep, with beautiful photos of the flock, the land and the farmers.

for *Baaad Anna’s Yarn Store* started Anna on a journey that led to 140 acres at the edge of the Boreal Plains region in Manitoba, a flock of Shetland sheep, and eventually her very own mill when she couldn’t find a single processor closer than North Dakota for her first harvest of 32 pounds of wool.

Anna’s account of the early years of Long Way Homestead are equal parts relatable, humble and inspiring, as

they learned the ins and outs of sheep handling, parasite management and learning to care for the soil:

“The first year was filled with every mistake in the book: not feeding the sheep enough quality forage, feeding the sheep too much grain to compensate, losing a baby llama to liver flukes — and subsequently realizing that we have to treat for worms. We



Like so many second and third career farmers, Anna came to her calling from urban roots. Anna started her journey in Vancouver, as a burnt-out, front-line anti-poverty advocate in Vancouver, with a dream to open a local wool shop. The struggle to source “100-mile wool”

realized ... that to grow good wool, we needed good management. We learned from our mistakes and little by little we built better infrastructure for stress-free animal handling. Perhaps most importantly for our long term goals, we realized that the most important thing



Brenda Hsueh at a 2022 EFAO field day.

market garden and CSA. Nurturing strategic partnerships with collaborators like Emily Foden of Viola Yarns have been part of Brenda's success in growing the fibre aspect of her farm, as well as a dynamic farming system that prioritizes soil, animal and land health and produces quality yarn with stunning colour and handle. In a fun postscript (not included in this book), Brenda has since gone on to make her wool fabric dreams come true, with clothing made from her flock's clip in collaboration with [Wave Fibre Mill](#) — possibly the only place in Ontario, maybe even Canada, that goes from raw fleece all the way to finished garment, 100% Ontario grown and processed. ■

Anna Hunter frames these stories as a call to action to seek out local fibre where you live. The truly wool-obsessed among us may even find inspiration in these beautiful pages to start or grow their own fibre flock.

Angel Beyde is EFAO's Strategic Partnerships and Eastern Outreach Director. She is a Black/ mixed race grower of food and flowers who has worked in Urban Ag, eco-landscaping and non-profits for many years in many guises: Organic Master Gardener, educator, facilitator, consultant and business manager. Angel and her husband steward an 8-acre farmstead in North Glengarry.

on our farm is the health of our soil and ecosystem and we began implementing techniques to work with the land base rather than against it.”

Doing a deep dive into sheep breeds and eventually teaching knitting workshops featuring specific types of wool, as well as offering a breed-specific wool subscription, led Anna to the farmers and stories featured in this book. Some of the fascinating and beautiful breeds featured include Bluefaced Leicester, Romney, Corriedale, Rideau Arcot, Coopworth, East Frisean and North County Cheviot. The chapter on Navajo Churros (Lone Sequoia Ranch, B.C.) includes an insightful section highlighting the history of colonization and assimilation of Indigenous peoples in the U.S., particularly the Diné (Navajo), dating back to the 16th century. Farmer Leanna Maksymiuk, who is not Indigenous herself, is committed to helping revive this endangered breed (who are well suited to the hot and dry conditions of the Okanagan Valley), by raising sheep, building awareness about their wonderful wool, and promoting Diné farmers and organizations who sell wool and yarn. Leanna also started Waste Not Wool, in response to the dismally low prices of wool nationally — she collects, sorts and gets wool processed to keep it out of landfill and sells it locally as roving and yarn.

The book features many more interesting sections on the history of wool and textiles in Canada sprinkled throughout the book, which give great

insight into the current state of our wool industry and hints toward what is needed to bring it back to life. Closer to home, EFAO member farmer Brenda Hsueh of [Black Sheep Farm](#) is featured with her colourful mixed flock of Shetlands, Gotland-cross and Romney-cross. The profile focuses on the ecological, regenerative potential of land management through sheep farming. Speaking about what led her to farming from a finance career in Toronto many years ago, Brenda explains: “I came into farming because I wanted to be somewhere that was at the intersection of environmental, food and social justice.” 2018 marked the beginning of a greater focus on sheep, after a decade of growing a no-till, nutrient-dense veggie

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