Ecological Farming in Ontario

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EFAO
ECOLOGICAL FARMERS ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO

Reflections on Farming and Racism

FLERDs at Dalew Farms

EFAO's Soil Health Benchmark Study

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On the cover
Cows grazing a sorghum sudangrass forage crop on a misty July morning at Seilern Farm.

EFAO
ECOLOGICAL FARMERS ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO

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 fosters healthy, vibrant communities.

Mission

EFAO support 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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Pandemic Revelations

By Crista Thor

Ontarians woke up in mid-March to find their lives drastically altered by what most of us now loosely refer to as 'the pandemic.' My son asked me one morning during chores a while back how COVID-19 got its name. To hear myself explain it, the definition sounded trite: short for 'coronavirus disease 2019.' Our response to this virus, however, has been anything but trite. In fact, I think the best description I've heard is that our response has been *revelatory*. Exceptionally so, I'd say.

I like the term '*revelatory*' because it holds something positive in a time marred by darkness. *It implies that when we must, we do.* When called upon to respond to the emergency, daily rhythms were altered to accommodate working from home, physical distancing and isolation. Kinda sounds like life on a farm! In fact, I would bet that ecological farmers are well equipped to deal with an upheaval of these proportions. Ever faced with variables and inconsistencies, farms are incubators for problem solving and adaptability.

Bottom line: no life left untouched by this pandemic and farmers are no exception. Restaurant closures, market cancellations, abattoir shutdowns, labour challenges; there have been many direct hits to farm businesses and many stories of farm resilience.

COVID-19 has made glaring all of our societal shortcomings – climate change, racism, food insecurity; all extensions of faltering capitalism. Faced with a new perceived danger, we hastened our responses and showed just how well we can alter our behaviour (limit travel, stay home, spend time with family, buy local, plant a garden, get some chickens, etc). Why were the dangers of climate devastation, rampant systemic racism and subsequent food insecurity not enough to trigger a scaled response pre-pandemic?

Suddenly people care about food and where it comes from, some opting to grow it! Seed houses are sold out, meat purveyors can't keep their freezers stocked, day-old chicks are flying off the shelves, Kijiji has lots of 'livestock wanted' ads and few animals for sale, farm supplies are backlogged due to increases in demand. The pandemic has brought the fear of food shortages to many who have never had that fear before. In them, we see action, which seems like a good thing. But let's all remember that access to nutritious food has major barriers to many segments of the population and the pandemic has not changed but intensified that.

Food's (and thus agriculture's) relevance in all of this cannot be understated. In agriculture, we see the same shortcomings that plague all other facets of our society. Systemic racism is not new, but this lived reality of so many is one more way the pandemic has been revelatory. What we chose not to see before can no longer go unseen. Even ecological farming, at its core dedicated to balance in ecosystems, is not untouched by systemic racism. Here in Ontario, we have a migrant worker crisis. We have significant land access challenges. Rural communities are largely white. Our agriculture was born out of colonization.

As ecological farmers, we work to mend what is broken on our land, but COVID-19 reminds us that a healthy ecology eludes more than farms. Much is broken and our attentiveness is needed now more than ever and in ways we probably never realized. But our skills in observation, our resilience and our dynamism oblige us to take on even more than we ever have before. Our reckoning just got a whole lot greater. And I can't think of a group of people better equipped to open their hearts and step into that responsibility.

Thank you, COVID-19, for being *revelatory*, for spelling out the uncertainty of our future. For some that uncertainty is new. For others, it has always been there. For farmers, who must face each day, each month, each changing season, with equanimity, always fully present, the future is as it has always been, a long way off. Whatever the pandemic brings going forward, farmers will draw on their unique ability to not only weather but lead, the change. ■

Crista Thor, along with her partner Mike and son Kjell, operates a farmstead east of Kingston, Ontario, where they have been no-till vegetable gardening, rotationally grazing cows, sheep and goats, chasing chickens and geese, and developing a small agroforestry project.

Reflections on Farming and Racism

By Brenda Hsueh

On top of living with the anxiety and uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic, these last few weeks have seen much righteous anger over the terrible murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. This, on top of so many other incidents, even right here in Canada: Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Toronto, D'Andre Campbell in Brampton, three Indigenous police victims in Winnipeg: Eishia Hudson, a 16-year-old girl, Stewart Kevin Andrews, and Jason Collins. The list just keeps going on.

These are just in the past few weeks. There's a history of this. It is not new. It is always terrible. And these are not 'unconscious' biases...we all know it's straight up racism. That Canadian woman in New York who called the police on a bird watcher, who happened to be a black male? She knew exactly what she was doing when threatening that man, it was not unconscious bias.

Racism is such an ugly thing, at the very root of all that is wrong in this world, a classification system, putting people into boxes. We human beings keep putting things into boxes. Dandelions are weeds, kill. Don't consider their various traits beyond that you don't want them in your monoculture lawn. Monoculture. I so hate these two sides of the same coin. Why do human beings seem to despise complexity so much? The world is not binary.

How did monoculture in agriculture become the norm? All in the name of efficiency. With great efficiency, we've lost resiliency, which is exactly what we need in the long run to survive this pandemic, climate change, and whatever other terrible things that are still coming. Monoculture and industrialisation, the move from small farms to giant farms...all for efficient production.

But who calculates this efficiency? Capitalism? Stock brokers who can't tell the difference between a stalk of wheat or oats? What about all the externalized costs? Degradation of soil? Environmental destruction? Poisoning of water? Farm land and livelihoods lost to debt collectors? Slavery itself is a result of capitalism and its destructive search for efficiency. Which again brings us to today, and Black Lives Matter. Because agriculture and profit are the very source of systemic racism. Not to mention stealing land from Indigenous peoples, here in Canada, and all around the world.

Why is a farmer writing about this? Because this farmer is a Chinese woman, born in Canada, living and working in a predominantly white part of Ontario (which is really anywhere rural) in a white dominated profession, despite the fact that every single culture/race farms. And it's lonely, and sometimes scary, to be out here. And when so many lives are taken because of racism, when Black Lives Matter even needs to be said, I just want to cry, and rage, and scream at the world.

I have experienced some overt racism in my life, been spit at, 'complimented' on how well I speak English, and belittled for eating 'strange' foods or 'weird' parts of animals. Very minor incidents, but all these things trigger the 'flight or fight' response...heart starts beating harder, hyperventilation, sudden flush of heat, and each incident is never forgotten. Is this familiar to you? Because I'm pretty sure every person of colour in North America, has experienced this at least once in their lives. But at least I'm alive.

Unlike so many black men, indigenous women...

I've been thinking a lot about systemic racism, and why so many people deny its existence, or can't admit that it's true. I think it comes down to narcissism. It's all about me. I don't see it. I don't understand it. It's not part of my reality. I see a lot of this in the farming world too. In the antagonism between organic and conventional farmers, the judgement of farmers looking at other farmers fields...anything different, outside the 'norm' is frowned upon. Growing mixed cover crops is wacky. Not mowing everything that isn't purposefully planted is wrong. There's an esthetic that calls for absolute neatness, straight lines, squared off fields, as if a good farmer must make his (or her, but really, mostly his) bed every morning with hospital corners. Because it shows the world what a disciplined and hard worker you are, as if this is your greatest value in the world. Bull shit.

Why are there so few people of colour in Canadian agriculture? Such a long list of reasons, which include the same ones for why there are just so few people in Canadian agriculture...prohibitive cost of land, food not valued enough so farmers can't sell for cost of production, lack of reasonable funding, high debt loads, little gain for so much work. But if you're from an immigrant family, who came to Canada to make a better life for their children? Well, I have yet to meet an Asian family who has leapt for joy when their child decided to become a farmer. They can be slowly convinced that it's a good life after a few years of resigning themselves to the idea, but I definitely haven't heard of anyone pitching farming as a good career choice, whether you're an immigrant or not. Farmers around here don't even encourage their kids to farm, or maybe at least not all of them. If you're 'smart enough' to be a doctor, lawyer, accountant, that's the better route to go. The hard labour of farming has a bad reputation, because manual labour is considered to be menial in our current society. Large farms in Canada can't function without migrant worker programs to bring in people willing to do the farm labour. And look at how well they're treated on average. At the time of writing, a third migrant worker in Ontario alone has died of Covid-19. And what about the largely Filipino immigrant workers at meat packing plants in Alberta? Isn't this just another form of racism? This pandemic has shone a bright light on the class system in Canada, and it sure isn't pretty.

I used to be one of those neatly mowed lawns, perfectly manicured gardens, kind of people. I grew up in the suburbs and lived in cities into my 30's. I came into agriculture having read Eliot Coleman's *New Organic Grower* and after spending most of a season at Everdale Organic Learning Centre. Twelve years of farming later, I've learned a lot, and continue to learn. I've forgiven myself for not having enough energy to keep everything perfectly weeded or mowed. And I've embraced diversity and complexity at the farm. I think this was already the road that I was going down when I left city life to start farming, but along the way, I've had to shed many preconceived thoughts about the right way to farm. It's going to be different at every farm, depending on the land, and who works there. If your heart doesn't sing with the work that you do, and you and your workers are mistreated, then maybe you're doing it wrong. Find another way, because there's always another way, even if it's not what your favourite guru farmer does.

Racism is such an ugly thing, at the very root of all that is wrong in this world, a classification system, putting people into boxes.

Let's practice anti-racist farming. Let's open our hearts and minds, reserve judgement, ask questions, keep learning. Let's not exploit ourselves, our families or our employees. Let's honour the past of the land on which we farm, and learn from indigenous peoples who lived on Turtle Island for centuries without destroying it, unlike all of us colonizers.

Let's embrace complexity. Go back to school by reading things off those anti-racist reading lists going around. If we all choose to think, and stop picking the easy answers, maybe our society can change. Speak up when people say things which are questionable...you don't have to be mean about it, just ask for clarification, 'What do you mean by that?', and the person speaking will have to start thinking. If not, we won't have a society worth living in. ■

Brenda Hsueh is an organic vegetable and sheep farmer in Grey County. She left the financial world of downtown Toronto 12 years ago to start the adventure of farming and hasn't looked back since. Now she farms at Black Sheep Farm with her partner Skyler, and 3-year-old daughter Emma, regenerating soil through almost no-till vegetable production, intensively managed sheep grazing, and pastured hens and meat chickens.

Dalew Farms Share the Benefits and Challenges of Working With a 'Flerd'

Dalew Farms produce grass-finished beef, lamb and goat as well as operating a thriving online farmers' market delivering a wide variety of locally-produced products to Sudbury, North Bay and the areas in between.

Going into its 16th season, Dalew Farms is owned and operated by Dave and Chantal Lewington and their children, Jake, Olivia and Emma. Dave and Chantal involve their children in farm operations as much as possible, with Olivia and Emma running a pastured egg enterprise and 12-year old Jake producing grass-finished goat meat. Jake runs his goats along with the lambs and some cattle, creating a "flerd". We've asked Jake and his dad Dave to tell us more about the benefits and challenges of working with a flerd.

So what exactly is a "flerd"?

JAKE: A flerd is a mix between the two words flock and herd. Our flerd contains sheep which are called a flock then we have some bottle calves and a group of cows, which is called a herd so we thought it would be neat to mix the words together and that's how we get the name flerd.

Why do you choose to graze your livestock in a flerd? What advantages does it give you?

DAVE: It gives us the advantage of having a bigger mob to graze than if we were to run each species separately, and we are able to improve the impact on our land. It also gives us the advantage of having one group of animals to manage, instead of two or three, so that simplifies daily chores and watering scenarios on pasture. Another benefit is that each species likes to graze slightly different plants, so often the diversity of the group allows us to better utilize the available forages we are trying to graze, or to better clean up weeds or brush in rental pastures we are trying to improve.

JAKE: The two main reasons are 1) predators, and 2) efficiency. When I say predators, I mean that we mix our cattle in because the coyotes and wolves are even less likely to attack – even though we have two [livestock guardian] dogs on pasture. Mixing the cattle in confuses them because at first they think it's an easy peasy sheep flock that will be easy to hunt but then they hear a calf balling and think it's a cattle herd and decide to stay away. Then efficiency; we mainly use our bottle calves for ground meat but by mixing them in [with the flerd], it gives the bottle calves a better chance to get more forage versus going in with the large cattle and being bossed around and the grazing pattern is more in a circle pattern because we don't need to build a permanent fence so we can move them more efficiently.

What are the most important things to consider when starting out with flerds?

DAVE: We just started our flerd – mostly by trial and error – after reading about the benefits others had written about. I think that you need to consider the fencing situation, and how you will rotate animals if you are rotational grazing. We use electric net fence. You also need to think about your watering situation – young lambs can't reach the same height of water tub that cattle can. Another important consideration is your mineral program – it will have to be adjusted if sheep are in your flerd. We use sheep mineral for our whole flerd, so I suppose in theory the dairy calves and goats don't get quite the mineral program they "should".

Are there any disadvantages of grazing in flerds?

DAVE: One annoying thing about operating a flerd, is that when I'm texting Chantal and Jake about "flerd" chores, autocorrect keeps changing "flerd" to something different, and doesn't recognize the word "flerd". I had to think hard for a disadvantage for our situation; but halving the calves in the mix does mean that we have to be careful when handling the animals. Not really for the daily moves, but when we are crowding them into a corral to load them onto a trailer to take them to another property for example. We load the calves first, so that they can't injure the smaller lambs.

Are there situations where you wouldn't recommend this type of set up?

DAVE: The only obvious scenario I can think of where I would not recommend

this type of setup is if your fencing can't handle all the different species you are considering grazing in a flerd.

What's your favourite piece of equipment that you use for grazing your flerd?

DAVE: Net fencing! It contains all the different species in our mix, including guardian dogs, its ultra-flexible/portable allowing us to graze and improve rented farm land, as well as cover crops.

JAKE: For me it's the tractors! Although the only thing the tractor has to do with it is moving the water wagon.

What's the most frustrating part of working with your flerd?

DAVE: Net fencing! :) I say this as a joke.... Mostly! We have lots of experience moving net fence, however, it can still be a frustrating thing to work with, and it takes practice to get efficient at installing and removing net fence without tangling it up! It can be especially tricky in brushy or bush situations, when you have black flies and mosquitos coming after you at the same time! ■

Above:
Jake Lewington cuddles up with a goat.

Left:
A Dalew Farms FLERD in action.

EFAO's Pilot Soil Health Benchmark Study: Part 1

In 2019 EFAO piloted a Soil Health Benchmark Study. Modelled off of Pasa Sustainable Agriculture's Soil Health Benchmark Study, it was funded by the Canadian Agricultural Partnership (CAP) for farmers in the Lake Erie Basin, and in collaboration with NFU Local 316 for farmers in the Kingston area.

In this two-part series, we will summarize the usefulness of benchmark studies and detail EFAO's Soil Health Benchmark Study (Part 1 – this issue); and then share the group's results from 2019 and next steps for continuing this program (Part 2 – Fall 2020).

What is a benchmark study and how can they help us?

The initial year of data collection for a benchmark study provides **baseline information from which to track – or benchmark – future change and regeneration.** In the case of EFAO's Soil Health Benchmark Study, participants can compare 2019 data to follow-up samples in 3, 5, 10 years, etc, and measure regeneration as an increase in soil health relative to the baseline benchmark.

When a benchmark study includes replicate samples from different sites in the same year, information from a single year can be used to **compare among sites.** In the case of EFAO's Soil Health Benchmark Study, participants took three replicate samples on three different fields so they are able to draw conclusions about whether the three fields differ with respect to soil health.

When benchmark data is collected by a group using a standard protocol, information can be combined to **provide information about the system.** For EFAO's Soil Health Benchmark Study, we were able to use the group's data anonymously to gather information about the state of soil health on ecological farms in Ontario and, ultimately, the benefits of ecological agriculture in Ontario. There are other important benefits of collecting benchmark data as part of a group (hint: community building!), and we will discuss these further in Part 2.

EFAO's Soil Health Benchmark Study

Thirty-two farmers participated in the study, 24 as part of EFAO's CAP grant and 8 in collaboration with NFU-O Chapter 316 in Kingston. Sandy to clay soils and fields in vegetable production, field crops and pasture were all included.

For indicators, EFAO's study focused on biological and physical attributes of soil, including organic matter, active carbon and water infiltration. While we recognize the importance of chemical attributes to soil health (e.g. sufficient and balanced micronutrients, cation exchange capacity), we chose OM and AC because they are two of the most sensitive, consistent and repeatable measurements of overall soil health (1,2); and we chose water infiltration because it is a good in-field measurement of the soil's physical attributes.

Following the group's protocol, farmers selected three fields or areas of interest and chose three representative plots in each area, for a total 9 plots. Using kits sent from EFAO, farmers sampled soil from each of their 9 plots after they sowed a fall cover crop, finished fall field operations or their final rotation for the season. They mailed their samples to A&L Canada Laboratories Inc. in London for analysis of OM (as part of the Basic S1B package) and AC; and conducted water infiltration in-field.

EFAO staff crunched the numbers this spring and sent Soil Health Benchmark Reports to each participant farmer.

In Part 2, we will dive into the group's results using anonymous data and discuss our learnings and what you can expect next from this program. ■

- You can find a Soil Health Benchmark Report in the Research Library at efao.ca/research-library.
- You can find details of the pilot program and links to the protocols at efao.ca/soil-health-benchmark-study.

Footnote:

1. Fine et al. 2017, accessed online at: https://acsess.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.2136/sssaj2016.09.0286
2. Hargreaves et al. 2019, accessed online at: https://www.nrcresearchpress.com/doi/10.1139/cjss-2019-0062#.Xwc8mS0ZMh8

Soil Health Indicators

Organic Matter, OM

The fraction of the soil that consists of plant, animal and microbial cells and tissue in various stages of decomposition. OM is approximately 68% carbon, and microbial necromass (i.e. dead microbes), can make up more than half of the OM of your soil. We measured OM via loss on ignition. The higher your OM the better.

Active Carbon, AC

The small portion of OM that is a readily available (i.e. labile) food and energy source for the soil microbial community. AC responds relatively quickly to changes in management. We measured AC via permanganate oxidizable carbon or POX. The higher your AC the better.

Water Infiltration

The process by which water enters the soil. Infiltration is an indicator of the soil's ability to allow water movement into and through the soil profile vs. pooling or eroding the soil. We measured water infiltration using a field method with 6" rings. In general, the higher your infiltration rate the better.

Farmers for Climate Solutions

By Brent Preston

If you've ever attended any kind of EFAO event, you know that EFAO farmers are obsessed with climate change. Whether it's at the annual conference or on a farm tour, we're constantly talking about ways to pull carbon out of the atmosphere and drive it into our soil. We have members who are electrifying their tractors, moving their cattle to new pastures three times a day, or inventing new machines to realize their dream of no-till, horse-powered spelt production. We know that as farmers, we have real agency in the fight against climate change, so we are experimenting, innovating and getting to work on our own farms to make climate-friendly agriculture a reality.

This commitment to action on the farm has been coupled with a desire to spread the word about climate and agriculture, and to have an impact on government policies that often make the problems worse, not better. The EFAO board has added policy advocacy as one of the pillars of our new strategic plan, but this is an area of work that is new to our organization. Luckily, there are other farmer organizations across Canada that share our commitment to climate change mitigation. Late last year, several of these organizations met and decided that we could achieve much more by working together than separately. In short order it was decided to form a formal coalition, and Farmers for Climate Solutions was born.

EFAO has been fortunate to be a founding member and part of the coordinating body of Farmers for Climate Solutions. Other members of the coalition include old EFAO allies like the National Farmers Union, Canadian Organic Growers and SeedChange, as well as regional organizations like Equiterre from Quebec and Farm Folk City Folk from British Columbia. Together we represent farmers from coast to coast to coast, of all scales and production systems. The level of alignment between all the coalition members has been remarkable: we are all passionate believers in the ability of farmers to have a positive impact on our climate, and we all recognize that the time for action is now.

For the past several months the coalition has been working hard to develop policy positions, craft a communications strategy and raise the money we need to take our message to the wider farm community and to decision-makers. We have started preliminary discussions with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and other federal ministries, and we are busy recruiting more members to the coalition. We want to build as broad a coalition as possible, while ensuring that the campaign remains farmer-led and focused on fundamental change in our agriculture system.

On a personal note, it has been extremely gratifying to be part of such an important and timely effort. As the EFAO representative to the coordinating body, I have had to dive deep into climate and agriculture policy and learn a lot about advocacy and government relations. I have had the chance to work with a group of incredibly smart, passionate farmers and farm organization leaders from all across the country. It has been a lot of work, but also a great deal of fun.

Please watch for opportunities to get involved with Farmers for Climate Solutions in the near future. We need feedback on our policy positions, and we need farmer advocates to carry our message to other farmers, policy makers and the public. And keep on sequestering carbon, increasing biodiversity and reducing emissions on your own farm. The example of our members is our most powerful message. ■

How to connect with Farmers for Climate Solutions

Subscribe to mailing list online: farmersforclimatesolutions.ca
Facebook: @FarmersFermiers
Instagram: @farmersfermiers
Twitter: @FarmersClimate

Brent Preston is the EFAO Board President. He and his wife Gillian Flies own and operate The New Farm, a certified organic vegetable operation near Creemore, Ontario, where they specialize in cut salads and cucumbers for wholesale markets.

MEMBER PROFILE

Jen and Mathias Seilern

Jen and Mathias Seilern own and operate Seilern Farm on 400 acres near Kincardine. They are certified organic and biodynamic and raise grass-fed cattle and field crops.

How and why did you begin farming?

We started farming full time on our own farm in 2011 but had done a few projects on my parents farm before then. I grew up on a farm and after leaving the farm for a few years to pursue other things was drawn back by the rural lifestyle I had taken for granted growing up. Mathias too had worked on farms in the past and missed working outside and with animals. We were also drawn to the independence of the lifestyle and the chance to work together and raise our family in the country.

Where and how do you sell your products?

We sell organic, grass-fed calves, fat cattle and beef as well as certified organic field crops such as corn, soybeans and wheat and market through various channels. The organic, grass-fed beef is sold through two online farmers markets: Eat Local Grey Bruce and D&H Newman. Calves and fat cattle are sold as live animals to independent farmers or buyers and the organic field crops are sold to organic grain buying companies.

Are you able to meet the financial goals for your farm? Can you talk a bit about the financial realities of your farm – opportunities and challenges?

We knew from the beginning that we believed in integrating livestock and field crops in a rotation that benefits the whole farm as well as the bottom line. The main difficulty with this model is that we needed to invest in twice the infrastructure at the beginning: all of the equipment and infrastructure for the cattle as well as all of equipment and infrastructure for the crops. Not to mention that we needed to purchase/rent the land and cattle. This significant upfront capital investment has made the start-up years challenging. Those are also the same years we have been slowly building our relationships with buyers and making a name for ourselves in the business. Through the years, the beef side of the business has lagged behind the crops in profitability because it was hard to find markets for the calves, yearlings and beef. Grass-fed beef is finally becoming more popular with eaters and market opportunities are opening up for us there.

What are some of the future plans for your farm/business as you look ahead?

We would like to continue to invest in the cattle herd in both genetics and better-handling facilities. A good cow herd is a life project.

What innovations in your grazing practices stand-out as successful? What are you striving for next?

We have employed rotational grazing strategies for the past 10 years and are very happy with the results. The land provides more forage now than it did when we took it over. We also always plant a cover crop before, with or after the field crop. The cover crop is often grazed or baled and wrapped for feed for the cattle. This helps both the land and the profitability of our business. This year we built a mobile watering system for the cattle so that we have more flexibility with grazing. We are also working on developing a fly trap system that moves with the water trough to try and help reduce fly pressure.

What innovations in your field crop cultivation practices stand-out as successful? What are you striving for next?

Last year we started using finger weeders on our scuffler for the first couple of passes in the corn and soybeans. This really helped us be able to get in scuffling earlier and scuffle closer to the crop. We feel it has made a significant difference. We are always striving to integrate the cattle and crops better every season. ■

Brussels Agri Services Ltd.

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Brussels Agri Services Ltd. is a feed, farm and fence supply business located in Brussels, Ontario, though they will travel throughout southwestern and central Ontario to support their customers. Their full line up of products includes: livestock processing equipment, EID and weighing devices, gates, feeders, water bowls, fencing supplies, animal health products, pet products and feed, CCIA and livestock management tags, and more. They are a leading fence installer and supplier and the largest independent Gallagher Power Fencing dealer in North America and a Passion For Pasture Pro Dealer, specializing in pasture management and rotational grazing solutions.

Much more than a farm equipment and supply shop, Tim Prior and his team at Brussels Agri Services will help answer your questions and work with you to solve your problems with clear, quality solutions. ■

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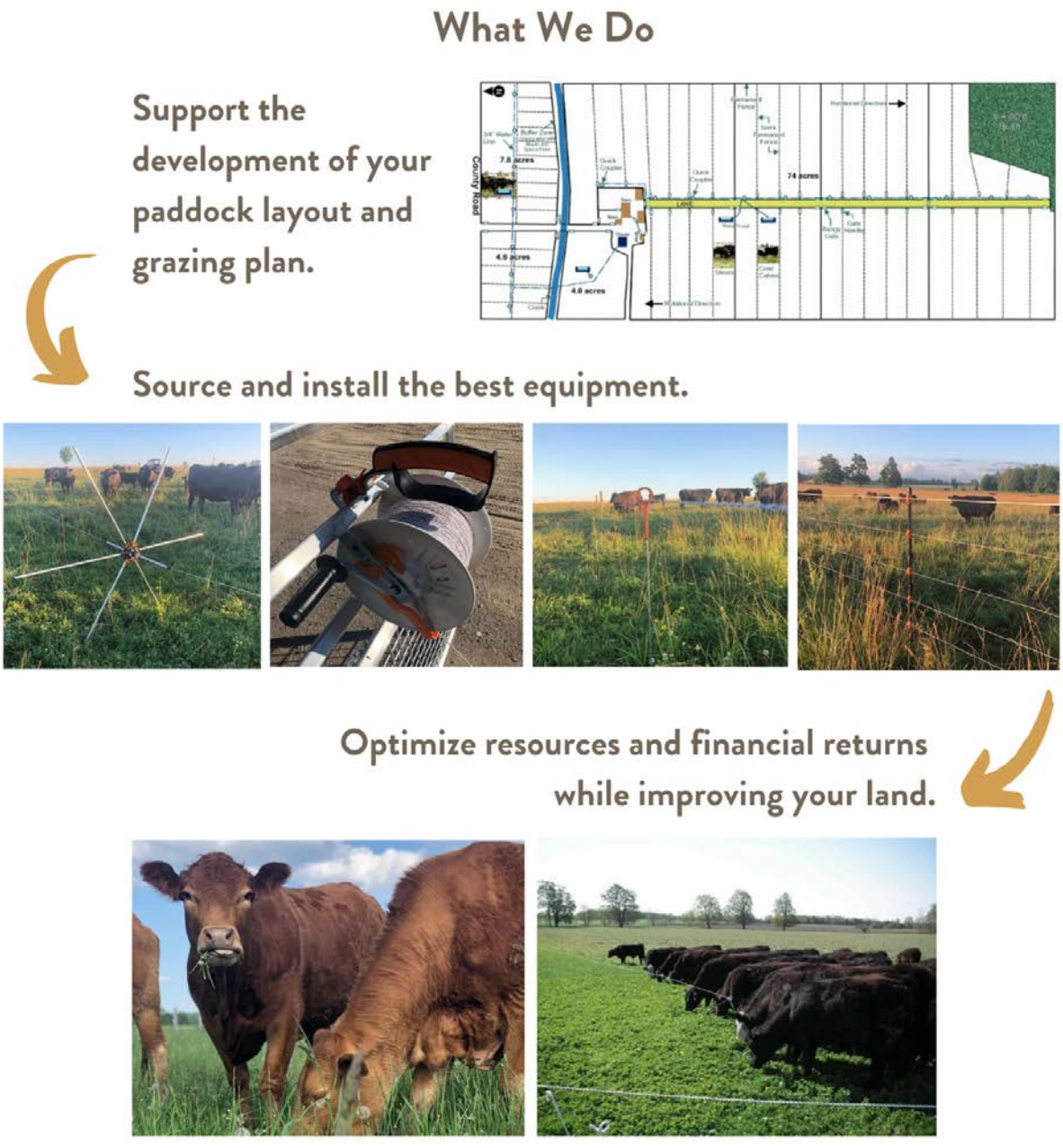
www.brusselsagri.com



Farmers on Social Media

1. "I love celosia against the dark clouds. The rain passed over us today but yay for yesterday's rain! And more coming this week." – Janet Tuenschel, County Cut Flowers.

2. "3 Generations working to fix our baler." – Dave Lewington, Dalew Farms.

3. "Spending this beautiful Canada Day weeding our bean and corn intercrop while training our beans up their support strings. No filter needed." – Shelley Spruitt, Against The Grain Farms.

1

2

3

Our Members are Sporting their EFAO Merch

4. Nikki and Stuart Oke sport EFAO merch while planting seeds and harvesting flowers, Rooted Oak Farm.

5. Dave Artymko likes to wear his EFAO hat while harvesting beautiful swiss chard, Salad Days Farm.

6. Angie Koch swears her hat helps her with transplanting, Fertile Ground Farm.

EFAO HORTICULTURE 2019: Lettuce variety trial

What are the best fall lettuce varieties for southern Ontario?

MULTI-FARM

SEED PRODUCTION & BREEDING

Farmer-Researchers


Angie Koch
Fertile Ground Farm - West


Joanna Kowalczyk
Table Community Food Center - East


Lise-Anne Léveillé, David Mazur-Goulet
BeetBox Cooperative Farm - East


Hilary Moore
Maplelane Farm - East


Leslie Moskovits
Cedar Down Farm - West


Harold Saunders
Saunders Family Farm - West


Ann Slater
Ann Slater Organics - West

Project timeline:
Winter 2019 - Fall 2019

IN A NUTSHELL

- Magenta, a red/green batavian, and Ruby Star, a red leaf, were the top performers with respect to overall vigor, flavour and germination.
- Adriana was the growers' least favourite.

BACKGROUND

The fall slot for lettuce is challenging because lettuce has to handle both the heat and dryness of summer and the cold and wet of fall.

METHODS

To compare different varieties for fall growing, these farmers - in consultation with Johnny's, High Mowing and Fedco seed companies - selected 11 lettuce varieties of interest. Each grower chose a subset and everyone committed to planting two replicates of each variety in their last two plantings of lettuce *(Table 1 on page 2)*.

RESULTS

Germination, Disease and Frost Tolerance

See Tables 2 and 3 on page 2.

- Data were limited, but Winter Wonderland and Speckled Amish had the worst germination (*Table 2*).

Table 4

Overall and flavour rankings (1 high - 5 low) and notes from the lettuce variety trial on seven farms. Favourable rankings (2.5 and lower) are highlighted.

Variety	# farms with data	Overall Average Ranking (1 - best)	Flavour Average Ranking (1 - best)	Rated BEST by one or more farmers	Rated WORST by one or more farmers	Other comments
Adriana	7	3.6	2.7		X	Disliked overall
Winter Wonderland	3	3.0	2.0	X		Bad germination (Table 3).
Speckled Amish	3	4.2	3.4	X	X	Small
Magenta	5	1.9	2.3	X		
Ruby Sky	3	1.6	2.6	X		Sold well
Newham	1	2.5	2.0			Small heads, similar to Spretnak but matures later in warmer months.
Green Star						No data due to poor germination (1 farm).
Spretnak	2	3.5	1.0		X	Small heads, similar to Newham but matures earlier in the warmer months.
Aerostar	2	2.5	3.0	X		
Starfighter	5	3.0	1.9			
Lovelock	5	3.5	2.8			

Crunch time: The best

Overall, the growers found that **Magenta** and **Ruby Sky** were the best performing varieties in this trial. These varieties had high overall and flavour ranking (<2.5), good germination and were rated the best by multiple growers. Interestingly, Magenta was a top performer in two summer lettuce variety trials in Iowa (1, 2).

"I will definitely continue growing Magenta. I have never grown Ruby Sky or Starfighter and I will grow them again as fall lettuce. I may try Lovelock again as well. As for Magenta, I have found it to be a very reliable variety in all seasons. It stood up well in this trial, although it did not germinate as well as some others and tended to be the last variety ready to harvest but it stood through some wet days...with the last harvested October 31 still in good condition." - Ann

"I have not grown a red leaf lettuce in the fall and I really enjoyed the crunch and lack of bitterness [of Ruby Sky]... [It was a] very pretty addition to a salad also." - Hilary

"Magenta and Starfighter were my favourites. Both sized up nicely and held a desirable shape (whereas others were somewhat deformed). Both were tasty and had no disease or rot issues. Magenta did suffer some frost damage though. Ruby Sky was also really nice in this trial in both plantings."- Leslie

"Found [Aerostar romaine] very sturdy, grew well into the fall. Good flavour and nice big head without disease or pest pressure. Magenta also very nice with crunchy leaves and good flavour." - Joanna

Photo: Magenta, a red/green batavian.

Photo: Ruby Sky, a red leaf lettuce.

Newham also had high rankings (<2.5), but was trialed on only one farm.

"Was really pleased with Newham in late plantings... [even though] I did not grow it for the trial." - Leslie

Crunch time: The worst

Adriana was one of the lowest ranking varieties, was rated the worst by multiple growers and was one of two varieties to show signs of disease. Growers noted:

- Lacked softness and butterfly flavour
- Did not size up well or form nicely compared to spring and summer plantings.
- Unattractive outter leaves

TAKE HOME MESSAGE

"Testing varieties in the field is a great way to test before using them in the hoop house" - Harold

Multi-farm trials are a good way for farmers to assess varieties. In this trial, 8 growers trialed 11 varieties. While results are limited for some varieties, **Magenta** and **Ruby Sky** were the group's favourites with respect to overall vigour, taste and germination, and Adriana was the group's least favourite.

In future years, the grower may use this dataset to select a smaller number of varieties for further evaluation. They will pay special attention to measurement selection so that data is collected consistently across farms.

[Continued on page 2. Read the full report at efao.ca/research library]

EFAO
ECOLOGICAL FARMERS ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO

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Read online: efao.ca/research-library

THANKS TO OUR PROJECT FUNDERS

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EFAO Farmers Work to Find the Best Lettuce for Southern Ontario's Climate

By Rebecca Ivanoff

Growing varieties well-suited to your farm dramatically increases your viability on every level, from profit to joy. On-farm variety trials can highlight crop traits well-suited to a grower's unique environment, market and management style while providing a sense of wonder and innovation that draws many folks to farming in the first place. They are also part of the beginning and final steps of plant breeding projects!

This year around 30 ecological farmers are participating in variety trials on lettuce, sweet potatoes, spinach for seed production, grain amaranth, overwintering peas, sweet bell peppers, radicchio, red and orange carrots, and rutabaga. Some of these are organized through EFAO's Farmer-Led Research Program, while others are organized through the Canadian Organic Vegetable Crop Improvement (CANOVI) Variety Trial Network (a national program implemented in Ontario by EFAO).

The biggest group of farmers trialling this year is in cooperation with two lettuce variety trials. Angie Koch, Ann Slater, Harold Saunders, Jon Gagnon, Laurie and Corey Ahrens, Lise-Anne Léveillé, Martina Schaefer, Norah Quast, Sarah Judd, and Hilary Moore – many who participated in last year's lettuce trial (see page 14) – are documenting the best summer lettuce and fall lettuce across southern Ontario during the 2020 season.

The summer trial is in response to many farmers finding that the hot summer weather in Ontario can make it hard to germinate and grow heads of leaf lettuce of a marketable quality. Each grower agreed to trial six varieties of leaf lettuce in a randomized and replicated trial over two planting dates – totalling a scrumptious set of at least 480 heads of lettuce for data crunching!! The growers chose the varieties from grower experience, input from seed companies and plant breeders, and results from other on-farm variety trials run through the Practical Farmers of Iowa and Seed Savers Exchange. The varieties they are testing during this summer's heat are: Green Star, Magenta (last year's top performer from the fall variety trial), Muir, Nevada, New Red Fire, and Tropicana.

The fall season for lettuce is challenging, as the lettuce has to handle both the heat of the summer and the cool of the fall with all the moisture and temperature variability that is characteristic this time of year. Starting this July, these farmers will trial five varieties of leaf lettuce in a randomized and replicated trial over their last two planting dates of the season. The five varieties that these farmers have chosen for the fall lettuce trial are: Encino, Red Mist, Grazion, Magenta, Ruby Sky, and Red Mist. Magenta and Ruby Sky were chosen because they were the top performers in last year's fall variety trial with respect to overall vigor, flavour, and germination. Having multi-year data on these two varieties is exciting because growing conditions can vary so much from season to season.

Do you have a hard time with summer lettuce bolting or does your fall lettuce not germinate or not form large luscious heads? Stay tuned for the research report on both these trials and let us know if you want to be part of a variety trial on your farm next year!

In choosing varieties, there were many factors to consider. Some farmers had a great experience with some varieties that they wanted to include to see if they did well for the whole group. We also wanted to include at least one of the varieties that did well in the Farmer-Led Research trial last year. Many of the lettuce that we chose are either bred by Vitalis Organic Seeds, a division of the Dutch seed company Enza Zaden, or Rijk Zwaan, a Dutch vegetable breeding and seed production company. These large seed companies have many plant breeders creating new lettuce varieties each year. Some of their varieties have been granted Utility Patents in the United States. A plant variety with a utility patent can only be used for crop production and cannot be used for seed saving to resell, give away, or replant, nor can it be used in a breeding program. This was a concern to some of the lettuce growers, as it means that

The five varieties that these farmers have chosen for the fall lettuce trial are: Encino, Red Mist, Grazion, Magenta, Ruby Sky, and Red Mist.

Many farmers are finding that the hot summer weather in Ontario can make it hard to germinate and grow heads of leaf lettuce of a marketable quality.

local seed companies would be unable to carry these varieties and the varieties could not be grown for seed locally and thus become regionally adapted. Other varieties that we chose were ones that are grown by local seed companies as they do not have any restrictions on them. One of the varieties that doesn't have any intellectual properties on it was Red Mist and for this variety, we trialled seed both from a Canadian seed company and directly from the breeders at Vitalis. ■

Following a degree from University of Guelph and interning and working with Whole Circle Farm in Georgetown, Rebecca Ivanoff joined EFAO in 2019 as EFAO's Seed Program Manager. Rebecca supports farmers to learn about regional seed production, and to implement participatory variety trials and plant breeding projects as part of The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security and EFAO's Farmer-Led Research Program.

The 7th Annual EFAO Conference is going online!

Dear EFAO Community and Supporters,

As we face new and unprecedented challenges in the face of the continued COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize that the need to connect, share ideas, and learn together is stronger than ever.

In light of continued health and safety guidelines, **the 2020 EFAO Conference will run from November 30 to December 5 in a virtual event format.** We are disappointed not to gather in person this year, but we look forward to digging into a new model and to the opportunities this brings.

While these are challenging times, we are also presented with a rare opportunity to reimagine and rebuild a more ecological, healthy, and just agriculture and food system in Ontario. We hope this will shine through as the focus of this year's conference.

What you can expect as part of this year's conference:

- A combination of live and pre-recorded virtual sessions, including plenaries;
- Technical discussion sessions drawing from the incredible and diverse expertise right here in Ontario;
- Multiple ways to connect and share with the ecological farming community;
- Sponsorship opportunities that allow participants to connect with organizations and businesses that will support their work.

Please don't hesitate to reach out at conference@efao.ca with ideas or questions. We look forward to a great event, and to learning and sharing together this fall!

Sincerely,
The EFAO Staff Team

Welcome to the EFAO team, Maureen

Maureen Balsillie leads the development of a new EFAO program to support field crop farmers across the province in adopting ecological farming practices, particularly with regard to diversifying their rotations.

Maureen grew up on Canada's most southerly fruit farm in Harrow, Ontario. She graduated from the University of Guelph with a B.Sc. in Biological Sciences in 2013. Since then she has worked with a variety of Agricultural organizations in the non-profit sector. She also spent 3 years working as a Political Organizer with the Green Party of Ontario where she worked on the team to elect the first Green MPP in Ontario. When not driving change, Maureen enjoys gardening and running and helping out with her partner's urban farm, Royal City Acres in Guelph, Ontario

Contact Maureen at maureen@efao.ca

Biodiversity is Strength, Resilience is Fertile

By Vivian Kaloxilos

Artwork title: Life above life below

Over the past few years, soil regeneration has become a hot topic in agriculture. The agricultural community is coming to its senses in realizing that soil is a living ecosystem that cannot be overruled in order to sustain us. For decades, our model of agriculture has separated our farms from ecology – much like the division we have imagined between humans and the rest of the natural world. We have been mining our soils for vegetables, extracting whatever we could from the land, without fully understanding what the earth is and how it functions. This is how we have come to measure soil fertility as a certain combination of minerals – minerals that do not have a reproductive function! It makes much more sense to talk about fertility in relation to soil life.

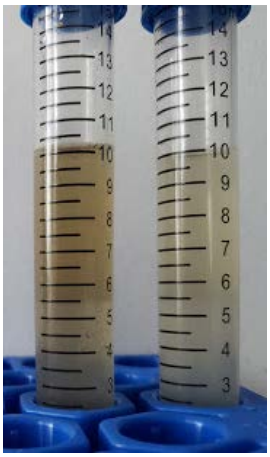
Thankfully, there is a growing understanding that soils, like the human body, relies on microbes in order to function properly. We are moving away from the mentality of "all microbes are bad", to realizing that there are essential organisms. Today it's common wisdom to eat yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, we take probiotics and drink kombucha to help maintain our health. We eat a healthy and diversified diet with good fats in order to maintain a balanced microbiome. Soil regeneration presents a similar learning curve but for our soils and plants. The engine doesn't run without a balanced microbiome.

It will take time for all of the different stakeholders to agree on a definition of "soil regeneration", however as this concept is rooted in ecological principles, let me offer my perspective as a soil ecologist and active contributor to the soil regeneration movement.

Soil regeneration for me, addresses the loss of biodiversity in our ecosystems, both above and below the ground. It bridges the gap between farms and the rest of ecology. It means reviving the metabolism of a plant that feeds and protects itself, and creating a resilient landscape that doesn't collapse entirely from one source of shock. It's the understanding that biological forces are not merely 'just there', but are interconnected with the chemical and physical properties and their impact on living organisms. It's the creation of resilient ecosystems of diverse plants, animals, insects and microorganisms, capable of holding themselves together in times of stress. It's also about letting go of control, and embracing our place in the web of life. One high profile example of this in another ecological arena is the reintroduction of wolves back into Yellowstone National Park. Over and over again we observe that life forms living in balance pave the way for new life to flourish.

Removing ecology from agriculture has led to monoculture and soil management practices that destroy life in the soil, the very mechanism of resilient plants and landscapes. Separating our farms from the rest of ecology has also led to the eutrophication of our water bodies, the collapse of hydrological properties of a landscape, the collapse of insect populations, and the pollution of our atmosphere. Farms are impacting environmental systems that stretch far beyond their property lines. Applications have been prescribed without regard for how they impact soil life, and how soil life supports biodiversity above the ground. We have created agricultural systems where plants are dependent on us to feed them and protect them from disease and drought, costing us more and more dollars per acre every year.

Let us define soil fertility as diverse and abundant communities of soil microorganisms and their abilities: mining rocks for minerals; recycling organic matter for nutrients; holding nutrients as water passes through; storing water; creating conditions that discourage disease from dominating a system. Plants are capable of caring for their own nutritional needs and immune system, independently of us, as they do in a forest system. The more microbes are eating, pooping, and reproducing in your soil, the more fertile and resilient your land will be. This also means your plants will be self-sufficient without the support of your pocket books. Bacteria, fungi, amoebae, flagellates, nematodes – each of these organisms deliver unique



ecosystem services and functions that are irreplaceable. We need them all to be present, and in the right balance according to the system you are supporting.

Our job in soil regeneration is to ensure we revive and encourage a diverse community of beneficial microorganisms so that the plant has many options. The plant has the ability to decide what best suits its needs on a day-to-day, hour-to-hour, year-to-year basis. There is no single organism or species that can regenerate soil. Rather, diversity, biomass, and a complete ecological profile will support resilience in your plants. It's not our job to tell our plant what it needs, it's our job to ensure that it has all the tools to be able to take care of itself. This starts with its microbiome. Applying agroecological principles such as diverse cover cropping and plant functions assist in the regenerating process. The exudates in the soil will help to feed a diverse community of soil organisms. The roots left over at the end of a season further increase organic matter providing extra microbial food in the soil. These efforts must go hand in hand with soil biology restoration. Without the microbes, the metabolism to make use of this added value is not present.

It is for these reasons that ecologists have been offering their perspective in agriculture by promoting soil regeneration on farms and on all soils. Not only is it the best thing for farmer empowerment and healthy food, it's the best solution we have to mitigate the looming ecocide heading our way, and to create adaptive resilience to a changing climate. My role isn't to tell you how to farm, I am not a farmer. But I can help you understand how to bring life back into your soil ecosystems.

Understanding why your soil acts a certain way is far more valuable than for me to tell you exactly how soils are regenerated, because not all soils are the same. The reality of soil regeneration is complex and intricate. It is location and condition specific, so it is hard to suggest practical steps that will be guaranteed to work in each of your, the readers', varying contexts. However, at the heart of soil regeneration lies the need for great composts, that are ecologically complete in their microbial communities. This means composts that have at the very least 300 micrograms per gram of soil of beneficial fungi and bacteria; a compost that is either equal in their fungal to bacterial biomass, or fungally dominant over bacteria; composts that have at least 50 000 amoebae and flagellates per gram of soil; bacterial, fungal, and predator nematodes; tons of beneficial spores, and so on. Typically agricultural soils are deficient in beneficial fungi and soil predators, and typical composts are also lacking in fungi and predators. So the first step to soil regeneration is making or sourcing compost that contains all these critters. If our soils are lacking in fungi, and the fungi is not even in our composts or liquid inoculums, how are you going to get them back into the soil in a timely manner?

Aside from having your home made or sourced composts tested for their microbial communities by a lab, there is an easy in house test you can do to see whether the compost you have access to has adequate fungal life in it to at least get you going in the right direction this season. I call this the humic acid test. You'll need a jar, some of your compost and some water.

Place 1 part compost for 9 parts of water in a jar, leaving some air room in the jar for mixing. Close the jar. Shake the jar thoroughly for 30 to 45 seconds, then let the jar sit for 30 to 45 minutes. Go back to look at your jar after it has settled for the recommended time, and observe the colour of the water in the jar. If you have a good fungal presence in your compost, the water in the jar will remain nice dark brown, even if all the particulate matter settles to the bottom (see test tube photo on left). If the water colour is a golden honey colour, this indicates low fungal biomass in the compost (see test tube photo on right). If the water is stratifying, and the top of the water in the jar is transparent, with particulate matter sinking to the bottom of the jar, this means this product has most likely met sterile conditions, and will have no fungal biomass.

Use the humic acid test to see if your compost or your source is going to help you increase your fungal biomass this season. If your compost fails the humic acid test, you know you need to tweak your compost methods to favour more fungi, or move along to the next compost producer before purchasing.

Fungi, with the right conditions, will grow underneath the snow in the winter time, increasing its biomass before the spring. The fastest decomposition rate on the planet is actually underneath the snow in the winter time, given the fungi is there and it has enough carbon organic matter to eat underneath the snow. If you do have compost that passes this test, getting it out into your field through a liquid or solid before the winter is a great start to regenerating beneficial fungal biomass soils. Just make sure you pick a time where your soils aren't too wet as to avoid compaction while doing this.

There is a growing community of soil ecologists proudly at your service – for you, your soils, and the betterment of our planet. These are humble beginnings, but we need to start somewhere! ■

Vivian Kaloxilos graduated from McGill's School of Environment as an applied ecologist, then later went into soil ecology with Dr. Elaine Ingham of Soil Foodweb Inc. She founded Docterre in 2015 as an accompaniment service to the soil life regeneration process and has a laboratory which tests for soil ecological communities. Based in Quebec, she assists farmers across Canada in high quality compost creation as well as the practical steps to regenerating soil ecosystems. In 2017, she was one of the creators of the "Living Soil Symposium" in Montréal.

Reimagining Land Access

By Bethany Klapwyk

There is an unstoppable fire right now in the heart of humanity akin to the power of a hummingbird's wings.

As I stood on a ladder trellising tomatoes I overheard the hummingbirds whispering into each flower they visited, "Defund the police." They leave with nectar for fuel and spread their message to each flower with a sugary lick. There is no bitterness on their tongue; their future is bright, equal, and good. Two birds are chattering in the sweet pepper patch about what the world will look like after the fall of white supremacy. They speak of an abundance of BIPOC landowners, and an end to the feudal system entirely.

There is an unstoppable fire right now in the heart of humanity akin to the power of a hummingbird's wings. Did you know a hummingbird's wings beat up to 80 times per second? Their hearts can beat up to 1263 beats per minute? The impossible is made possible around me on this little farm every day which means I can say, of course Black Lives Matter. Of course we can open prison doors rather than let people die of Covid-19 inside for crimes they likely would never have committed had their needs been met in the first place; of course we can ensure that every Indigenous community has safe drinking water in the very least; of course we can disarm the police and offer more appropriate services to those struggling; of course the many brown and black hands growing our food in this country deserve healthcare and every right afforded our own citizens. Never have these things even been close to impossible.

White EFAO Land-owning members, I believe we have some big work ahead of us. Yes, we are already doing "enough" by tending land ecologically. But what about the fact that our land is stolen from Indigenous communities? What about the fact that almost all rural landowners are white settlers? What about the fact that in owning or securing land we hold immense power that many BIPOC farmers do not?

Indeed it is an uncomfortable thing to face. For myself also. I have squirmed in my seat of late and wanted to point fingers. I want to point out that those of us who have secured land are no different than friends in town who used wealth to secure their homes in the city. Why must I take responsibility for this great injustice in society as a landowner who is already working hard to create a gentler reality for the earth in the way we farm? What about all the struggles we've faced trying to create a business in a near-impossible economic model to pay the bills? What about the fact that we are already under-resourced ourselves and not even paid each person, including ourselves, a living wage?

Once I'm through with my squirming, which comes and goes, I remember. I remember the reality of land-ownership in our country. I am still white, and still farming on stolen land.

I envision a future where all Brown and Black and Indigenous farmers own land or have land sovereignty in some other way. Where all farm staff on all farms are paid living wages. I envision a future where land laws have reformed to prioritize the tending of soils by

ecological growers. I see a future where rural housing laws have been changed to allow for the success and propagation of many small ecological farms. I see a future where rural Canada is much less white.

I have no idea exactly how to get that future, but I was asked to write this article because I've been taking some steps that I consider part of my personal reparations plan in regard to white supremacy and land-ownership. I feel deeply uncomfortable in sharing these, because I don't want you to think that what I am doing is good/right/ideal. Please do not pat me on the back. Instead think about what you will do, what speaks to you, and where you are in your journey.

I am building relationships with a handful of BIPOC farmers and offering land for rent on our farm (long or short term lease). I also offer land for mobile housing. I offer informal mentorship. I share the resources that I might otherwise be sharing with white farmers. I prioritize some of my time and efforts to this – time that could be spent tending my own gardens. I am dismantling our farm's internship program which doesn't pay a full wage and has thereby vastly excluded new BIPOC farmers from participating. I use my social media platform to disperse information about BIPOC farmers and fundraising initiatives.

The hierarchical relationship I am embarking on in offering land to share is unideal. To be a white person in a landowner-tenant situation, it is my responsibility to learn history, to learn about my own oppressive behaviours, to learn how to hold uncomfortable feelings. I attend to this by listening to podcasts, taking a course on racialized trauma, and seeing a therapist regularly to help me with the things that get in my way.

Every single BIPOC farmer I meet desires land sovereignty – to own and be able to do what they wish on a small farm. I don't know how we ended up in a reality where this simple and modest dream is so hard to accomplish. So many of us, even landowners, are operating in an oppressive economic model that has us pushing ourselves and our staff to our limits each year. What if we just landed in the truth that this economic and land-allotment system doesn't even work for us, let alone our BIPOC communities. What if we did the work of imagining a future where accessing land looked differently? What if we didn't settle for this current reality? What if we came up with something that worked for all of us?

Here are some questions for white farmers to consider:

- What are some of the ways in which you run your business that further oppresses BIPOC communities?
- What risks are you willing to take to work to end white supremacy?
- What resources and skills do you have to share with the BIPOC community?
- How are you using your social networks and platforms to further the work of BIPOC farmers?
- Is there some way you could fundraise to help a BIPOC farmer access land?
- In what ways have you accepted the harsh reality of farming on stolen land, and are you willing to look at this?
- What is your personal reparations plan with BIPOC communities, and particularly BIPOC farmers and gardeners?
- Can you create jobs or internship positions that are fully paid and help bridge the gap in education that exists for many BIPOC farmers?

Feel free to reach out to me. I am particularly interested in hearing from people that are at a place where they are ready to offer land, time, and resources (I have more interest from BIPOC farmers than I can offer at this point from only reaching out publicly twice about our offerings.) I want to collaborate on fundraising for Ontario BIPOC farmers.

I intend to do this work informally. Being supported informally by other farmers has offered my farm more value than any other relationship. The farmer-to-farmer relationship is a powerful one. Small farmers in the EFAO community have been on the front lines of de-constructing the industrial food system, and now I think it is time for us to de-construct the land-access reality that keeps brown and black bodies from owning and operating small farms. ■

Bethany Klapwyk is a queer farmer, mama, and musician who co-owns Zocalo Organics with Seb Ramirez near Guelph, Ontario. Bethany is passionate about Farmer Wellness, and wants to see a world full of happy, healthy ecological farmers of every race, physical ability, sexual orientation, and age. She has been farming for ten years and owned land for five. Zocalo Organics produces vegetables for the local community using space intensive no-till practices. The farm operates with the help of three interns and three staff.

Long Days

It was an evening in late June a while back. I was sitting in the open trunk of my SUV on the edge of the field finishing dinner when I saw the most incredible sight: a neighbour's truck towing a very large, very full, portable water tank. I can still feel the relief and joy that washed over me at that moment.

It was my first year farming. I was in a new community with wondering and prying eyes, away from my known support systems and trying to figure out the ins and outs of making a go at this on my own. After years working on other farms, this was both incredibly freeing and completely (and sometimes overwhelmingly) daunting. I was focused on growing vegetables that year and it felt like I had thousands of babies constantly needing coaxing and feeding and encouraging.

That spring and early summer had been incredibly dry. I don't know if it broke any records but the soil was cracked, the plants were wilting, and I was heat exhausted by mid-May. On this night in late June, we were three weeks into a drought and my nearest water access was a 10-minute walk away. I would fill buckets and drive them out to my field then hand water my plants while trying not to waste a drop and hoping that it was enough for seeds to germinate and plants to survive.

On days they were calling for rain, I would work in my field watching the clouds in the distance, wishing and praying that one would find its way over my dry soil. I texted a farmer 10 minutes up the road: was it raining there? Which way did it look like it was moving? How much fell? With fingers crossed, I would wait to no avail.

That night in June was one of those days when I couldn't see a way through this. My hoping and wishing hadn't worked and I was nearing exhaustion hauling water. The long days were too long and too dry. How could I continue this? As a new farmer with limited resources and expertise, I didn't know how to fix this problem. Over dinner that evening, I found myself starting to resign that perhaps this wasn't going to happen; perhaps the plants wouldn't be able to grow; perhaps I just couldn't do this.

And then I saw it: this big, beautiful, full water tank being towed to my field by a neighbour. I didn't know it was coming and hadn't asked for it. But this neighbour (who managed thousands of acres surrounding my small piece of land) heard through the small, interconnected community that my fields were dry and I needed help.

I remember in those early days being offended when people were quick to offer advice and suggestions, thinking they were doubting and judging my abilities. And maybe they were? I would wonder if it was because I am a woman? Or because I was solo? Or because of my age? But in this moment, on that evening, that water tank didn't offend. It was not a message of doubt, but one of solidarity. The long, hot, and sometimes drought-filled days of summer are a unifying force and there is so much beauty in these community relationships. I understood then that I, not unlike my vegetable babies, just needed a little help to grow.

After the water tank was set-up and my gratitude (and tears) expressed, the neighbour set off for home and I got to work: the cracked soil slowly became softer, the plants started to perk up, and my tears were washed away by this cool water on a long, hot, summer day. ■

By Anonymous

Hurriedly taken, blurry photo. Dinner at nine pm.

I didn't make the udon noodles, but we did grow the mushrooms, garlic, and asparagus that made their way into the meal tonight. I made the pottery bowls our dinner is nestled in.

These summer days begin early, end late, are filled with a seemingly endless To Do List – a list that often lacks completion by day's end. But these dinners remind me of skills and space I often take for granted; of the casual magic in growing food in our own front/side/backyard.

I think about how cool this is, as we eat dinner amid a tired haze. ■

By Lisa Giraldi

Farmers Write is an opportunity for EFAO members and friends to share real-life short stories on topics inspired by life as a farmer.
The topics are intentionally broad: please feel free to express in a way that makes sense for you and your story. We aren't as concerned about style and perfect writing, as we are about great stories that others might find truth in as well. We suggest a word limit of 250 to 450 words but are happy to help edit a story. We are able to publish stories anonymously if that allows you to be more free in your writing.

To submit your story, please visit efao.ca/farmers-write or send your typed, double-spaced submission to EFAO 5420 Hwy 6 North Guelph, Ontario N1H 6J2. Please include your email address and phone number. If you cannot type, please print clearly.

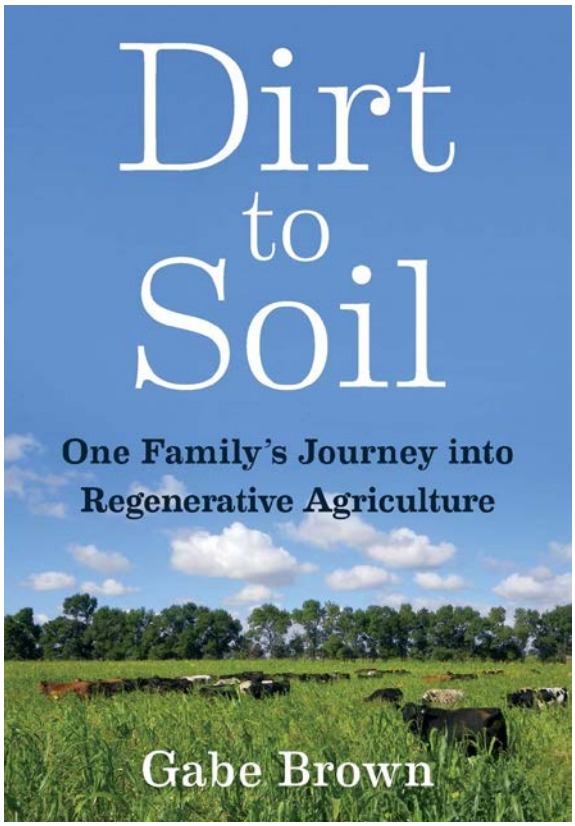
Upcoming Topics
Fall 2020 – Breaking The Rules
Deadline September 15

Winter 2021 – Good Advice
Deadline December 15

BOOK REVIEW

Dirt to Soil: One Family's Journey into Regenerative Agriculture

Review by Tony McQuail



I borrowed *Dirt to Soil* by Gabe Brown from a friend to read over the Christmas holiday. Before the holiday was over, I had ordered five copies so that I would have one for our bookshelf and 4 to give away as "pass along books." I gave them to two of our neighbours, the farm loans officer at our local credit union and the manager of our local farm coop. Inside the cover was an invitation to read the book and then pass it on to someone else they thought would find it interesting.

Dirt to Soil is the story of the Brown family's journey to becoming one of the poster farms for regenerative agriculture. It is a tale of desperation, determination, and experimentation. After four years of consecutive crop failures due to weather disasters, they were broke and in danger of losing the farm but instead of giving up they decided to let go of most of the conventional wisdom and inputs of industrial agriculture and began looking to nature for guidance on how to manage their land and livestock.

It is an interesting story engagingly told. For a farmer there are tales that ring true and many that will hit close to home as Brown recounts some of the universal challenges and joys of farming as experienced in their specific operation. There are also lessons generously shared about their transition from conventional chemical agriculture to a regenerative, biological one. It describes how their thinking changed and how they learned to trust their own observations as they experimented with reducing or eliminating inputs and trying new approaches.

The book includes useful references and resources and shares thoughts and practices for soil health. Gabe says, "I follow five principles that were developed by nature, over eons of time." These are: 1 – limit disturbance, 2 – armour the soil surface, 3 – build diversity, 4 – keep living roots in the soil, and 5 – integrate animals. The book includes clear and understandable explanations of each of these principles as well as the family's experience incorporating them into their operation.

Brown also shares a remarkably resilient attitude: "Mistakes and failures are inevitable in farming, and the silver lining is the lessons we learn from them. But learning through experiments and crop trials such as our paddock water supply system and planting diverse mixes of cover crops – was a lot more fun than learning from failures!"

It touches on the challenges that changing from the conventional system may create with in-laws and neighbours. Brown explains how thinking outside the conventional box not only improved the health of their biological systems but also turned their operation into a profitable one. He says, "I like signing the back of the cheque, not the front."

Chapter nine "Will it Work on Your Farm" describes the experience of nine different farms across North America. In Chapter 10, "Profit not Yield" Brown says "Nature does not care about yield or pounds, nature cares about enduring." Turns out that enduring and farming with nature can also be profitable and enjoyable. The book's conclusion is "Do Something" and it is Brown's message throughout: observe, experiment, try new things – do something. It is an inspiring read. ■

Tony McQuail, together with his wife Fran and daughter Katrina, run The Meeting Place Farm an organic mixed livestock operation that uses Suffolk Punch and Belgian horses. Both Fran and Tony are founding members of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario.

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