

A fresh look at our organic roots

Organic farming is as productive as conventional methods, according to studies, experts and producers



Janine Gibson at her home and office at the Northern Sun Farm Co-op south of Steinbach, where residents live off the grid. PHOTO: SHANNON VANRAES

By Shannon VanRaes
CO-OPERATOR STAFF

Janine Gibson isn't surprised when she hears about studies that find organic farming to be as productive as conventional production methods.

"To think that it couldn't be, well that's just garbage," said the organic inspector and co-founder of the Organic Food Council of Manitoba.

According to an American study released this year, organic yields match or surpass those of conventional farming, but that comes as no surprise to those who practise and promote natural cropping systems.

Gibson, who lives at the Northern Sun Farm Co-op near Steinbach, said organic farming isn't just possible, it's necessary.

"People are starting to look at climate change, and the issues with food and see there is a need to do things differently," she said.

A 30-year-long study at the Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania, known as the Farming Systems Trial, supports that view. The trial examined organic systems and found conventional farming methods produce 40 per cent more greenhouse gases than organic ones and produce lower yields during periods of drought.

The trial also found organic methods build up key microbes, and retain necessary organic matter in the soil.

A Canadian study co-authored by a York University professor this spring came to the same conclusion after looking at 130 studies to compare the energy use and global warming potential of organic versus conventional farming. It found organic farms were more energy efficient on both a per-hectare and per-product basis, with the exception of fruit farming and poultry production, where sufficient data was unavailable.

"These findings shake up the concept that 'bigger' is always better. Higher crop yields, bigger equipment, less genetic

diversity, and more fertilizer and pesticides do not equal a more energy-efficient operation," said Rod MacRae, assistant professor in York's faculty of environmental studies, in a news release.

Glenlea study

University of Manitoba agronomist Martin Entz has visited the Farming Systems Trial and finds the research credible. He said changes in natural cropping systems over the last few decades have enabled increased yields.

"In terms of total food production it is very close," said Entz. "I don't think they could have always said it was as productive as conventional systems, but there have been a lot of changes."

He said plots at the Glenlea Research Station's organic crops field study — begun 19 years ago — have produced organic wheat with a yield about 20 to 25 per cent lower than conventional methods.

"But organic systems often include a forage phase, so in terms of total caloric production organic is higher," said Entz.

Recent trials at Glenlea have averaged yields of 71 bushels an acre for barley and 46 bushels an acre for fall rye, while also exploring the advantages of grazed green manures and cover crops.

Entz said interest in organic production is increasing, noting benefits extend beyond yield for products like grass-fed livestock which produces more beneficial omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids.

"That makes it perfect for humans, we need it to live," said Entz.

The agronomist said organic producers can have challenges with nutrients, but that they can be overcome by adding things such as composted manure, while fixing nitrogen through green manure, such as legumes, is fairly straightforward.

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