



Agronomist Martin Entz works with a dedicated team of researchers at the University of Manitoba and runs Canada's longest-running field laboratory dedicated to organic crops. PHOTOS: SHANNON VANRAES



Danielle Caners stocks the shelves at Vita Health Fresh Market's Osborne St. location with organic produce.

Product awareness

Priscilla Reimer heads the Manitoba Organic Alliance, an umbrella organization for organic associations and producers. The organic inspector said sound scientific research is an important aspect of promoting organic production methods, but added current findings are not unexpected.

"To me it's a non-argument ... yes, we can feed the world using organic systems," she said. And National Organic Week, taking place now, is a way to get the public engaged.

"If people are encouraged to take a closer look at what organics are out there, have an organic meal, maybe a glass of organic wine, and think about the food we eat, I would be delighted," said Reimer.

Organics week is also an opportunity for organic retailers such as Vita Health in Winnipeg.

"We're using it for a lot of good product awareness, and it's a good way to get people inter-

ested," said Mathew Holtmann, vice-president of Vita Health Fresh Market. "Our sales have been growing every year, and the industry still has a lot of room for potential growth."

He said interest in organics is growing among major retailers as well, with stores like Safeway, Loblaw's and others now carrying organic products.

"We see that as really positive, we don't look at it as competition because we all benefit," said Holtmann.

He added Manitoba doesn't always have access to the same spectrum of products that Ontario or British Columbia might because its population is smaller and less dense, but said recent changes to certification standards have increased the availability of organic products.

According to Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives, the world market for organic food has grown significantly over the last 15 years.

Growth of retail sales in North America is predicted to continue at 10 to 20 per cent per year during the next few years. In 2008, the retail organic food market in Canada was estimated at over \$1.5 billion and \$22.9 billion in the U.S.

But Reimer and Gibson say more could be done to support organic practices in Manitoba.

Currently there are no provincial programs in place for organic producers, although the three-year-long Manitoba Organic Transition Program wrapped up in 2010, after paying out \$70,400 toward annual

certification costs for 90 producers and 10 processors.

Gibson also noted organic farms are inspected yearly, while only one or two per cent of conventional farms are inspected in any given year.

"We have been under attack by this government policy for a long time," she said.

Hopeful about the future of organic agriculture, Entz doesn't see the growing interest in organics as just a passing fad.

"I think herbicides are the fad," he emphasized. "Monoculture, the amount we spend on herbicides; these

methods are not sustainable. But I'm confident in organics, we have 9,000 years of agricultural history on our side."

He noted current trends in advertising for pesticides and herbicides point the discussion in the wrong direction by using militant language, portraying weed control as a fight and the farm as a battleground.

"But this isn't a war, and it's not a matter of who is right or wrong, it's a matter of creating resilience and building sustainability," Entz said.

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