

Organic farm thrives in Fraser Delta

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In BC's pristine provincial capital, August's IFOAM 2002 Organic World Congress is attracting the attention of organic farmers from around the world.

Organic farmers? For many Canadian farmers, the term conjures up visions of market gardeners with day jobs, smug attitudes and little understanding of what it takes to operate a commercial farm.

But increasingly, in small pockets across Canada, young, progressive thirty-to-forty-something farmers (and a few old wise ones as well) are moving to capture the value-added of organic markets growing by 20% a year for the past decade...

Perched on the edge of markets and opportunity, Delta's Fraserland Farms Organics is one such example. Farming 1,000 plus acres of rich Fraser River delta soils 15 minutes from Vancouver, Fraserland is the brainchild of second and third generation farmers Danny Chong, Brent Harris, Ab Singh and former provincial organic crops specialist Harvie Snow. Together, they produce organic peas and beans for the processing market and produce, pack and ship fresh organic corn, beans, potatoes, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and leafy vegetables to domestic and international buyers. They are currently experimenting with different recipes (horse, cow, hog and poultry manure from Fraser Valley farms; leaf, household and yard waste from the regional district) to maximize the microbial bio-effectiveness of COMPOST TEA, a brew concocted from compost, humic acid, kelp, simple sugar, clay and molasses in a small on-farm facility.

The success of Fraserland and others like them is critical to the economics of farming in the Delta. A prime potato-growing region that traces its history back to the Gold Rush, Delta once sported a local chip plant and near-by processing facilities for peas, beans and corn, ensuring farmers access to good markets, good rotations and good returns.

Several things happened to change all that.

When the Columbia Treaty captured glacial freshets behind three treaty dams, it allowed for the delivery of irrigation water to 1 million acres of dryland farming in the Columbia Basin Project. Virtually overnight, heat, wheat and rattlesnakes turned into spuds, apples and onions on 500,000 irrigated acres, flooding the BC market. With another 500,000 to go.

Beginning in the late 1980's, much of the Fraser Valley's processing infrastructure either shut down or moved south. Nalley's relocated their potato plant to Washington's Umatilla Basin (following the newly irrigated potato crops); Green Giant shut down two processing plants (when local farmers tried to buy the corn line, "sold" was the corporate reply; "cut up for scrap" was the corporate truth).

Now cheek to jowl with the longest and most aggressive urban edge in the province, Delta's soils and climate capability/suitability rating ranks it among the best farmland in the country, Delta is also an internationally significant habitat for many species of migratory and domestic birds and waterfowl.

Facing subsidized imports, a loss of infrastructure, skyrocketing land speculation and high environmental costs, Delta's farmers need new economic options if farming is to survive. Greenhouse production is one. Commercial organic is another. Both are dependent on good integrated pest management, and that side of the equation is getting a boost from some very high level international cooperation: this August, the first platoon of tiny bi-national wasps were released in a cranberry bog in Delta.

Cranberries are an important crop for BC. The pest being controlled is one for which the registered insecticide is being withdrawn. When the cost of Canadian-produced *Ephesia* eggs – into which the female *Trichogramma sibericum* wasp lays her eggs - increased in price in the mid 1990's following a US takeover, the cranberry industry funded IPM professional Dr. Deborah Henderson (ES CROPCONSULT) to find a solution.

Henderson was hot on the trail when a 27 member Cuban agricultural delegation toured BC farms in 1999 under the *Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project*. "They visited an organic farm where my company was doing field trials using biocontrols for caterpillars in vegetable crops. It was a pleasant surprise to find a related *Trichogramma* species was used regularly in Cuba to control similar pests. That summer, we discussed the idea of an exchange. Two years and one trip to Havana later, Cuba offers technical expertise, a different, less costly rearing host (*Sitotroga*), facilities available when we need them and the potential for significant future projects. We are now experimenting with *Trichogramma* in greenhouses and raspberries."

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In BC's farming heartlands, young farmers like Harris, Chong, Singh and Snow are attracting the respect of commercial farmers from around the community.

This is how change happens...