

Shuswap's Organic Revolution

A *Shuswap Passion* column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

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The local food movement received a big boost on September 3rd, thanks to the very successful *Feast for Change* event at the Carlin Hall organized by the Shuswap Regional Food Network. The hall was filled with diners enjoying gourmet foods all sourced from local farms and prepared by young chefs experimenting with novel combinations of grains, vegetables, fish, and lamb. And with the profits from the dinner going towards improving Shuswap's expanding food network, we will all benefit for years to come.

Having gardened organically for 43 years, I know how labour intensive it is to grow food without chemicals and have often marvelled at those farmers who have decided to make their livelihoods using organic methods. In the spring, we visited one of the Shuswap's most successful organic farms, Wild Flight Farm located in Mara, near Grindrod where there is the largest concentration of organic farms in our region. Co-owner, Louise Bruns showed us through the greenhouses and the produce preparation building and explained some of the tricks of their trade.

With their greenhouses, they get an early start in the spring by growing greens such as corn salad and spinach while there could still be snow on the ground. Thousands of plants are started in plug trays and when the seedling roots fill these mini-containers, they can be easily lifted out by the stem for transplanting. Maintaining healthy, fertile soil is the foundation of organic farming and at Wild Flight they use green manure, by alternating fields each year and using cover crops that are ploughed back in to add both humus and fertility to the soil. Rotating fields also helps to control weeds, but they also use tractors designed for row crop cultivation with assorted tools attached underneath that carefully till the soil between the rows of vegetables.

Despite using techniques that save time and labour, workers are still needed to plant, weed, harvest and prepare the vegetables for market. Although one might think that in this era of computers and technology, when many industrial farm workers are brought in from other countries, it would be difficult to find workers for the growing number of organic farms. However, there are also an increasing number of young people, some from other

countries, who enjoy trading their labour for a chance to experience life on an organic farm. An association called the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms connects young “woofers” with these room and board exchange opportunities.

While it may seem enough of a challenge to grow organic produce or raise organic livestock, the real challenge is making a living at it. Farmers markets do provide a great outlet for farmers, but a more dependable system of marketing called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is also popular in the Shuswap. For an annual fee, consumers are provided with a weekly box of vegetables that they pick up themselves at various locations. Two farms provide a CSA service, Wild Flight, and new this year, Ranfurly Farm in Turtle Valley. As well, Leaf and Thistle in Salmon Arm provides a home delivery service with produce sourced from organic farms. Also very popular is the all-organic market held on Wednesday afternoons at the Deo Lutheran Church parking lot.

Even though no chemicals have ever been used in our gardens, it would still take us a number of years to become a certified organic farm if we ever decided to try farming. The certification regulations were developed in B.C. over 20 years ago and there are a number of associations that offer the service. In the Shuswap most organic farms are certified either through the North Okanagan Organic Association or the Pacific Agriculture Certification Society. The process takes over three years and involves sliding fees based on income, soil testing and site visits by a verification officer. Hermann Bruns believes the annual fees are well worth it because “customers can rest assured that all organic production methods are in fact being followed.”

Organic food production across the world is growing exponentially, as more and more people now demand healthier food choices. Agriculture Canada estimated in 2003 that sales of organic products rise 20 percent a year and here in B.C. well over half the population purchase organic food at least occasionally.

While most people are aware of the health benefits from eating organic foods, there are also many environmental benefits. Industrial farming is estimated to create nearly 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, which could be sharply reduced by switching to organic farming. As well, organic methods protect the environment and help reduce the pollution of our waterways from phosphate based fertilizers. Even grass-fed livestock

produce 20 percent less methane than those fed grain.

The Shuswap Food Action Co-Op sponsors a number of programs to foster local food production and use, including a community garden project, a community kitchen, and the Eat Local project. To learn more about the benefits of eating local and to find an organic farm near you, visit their website: www.shuswapfoodaction.ca or the Certified Organic Associations of B.C. website, www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca.