



Haliburton Farm

organic farming for our community

Newsletter #2

Spring 2003

Growing season is upon us at Haliburton Farm – the Indian plum has flowered, the stinging nettles are up, the ducks are lounging in the pond, and we even caught a glimpse of a garter snake in the grass in our last farm walkabout. Plans for Haliburton Community Organic Farm are moving ahead, thanks to a number of volunteers who appeared over the winter to provide consultation on various aspects of the farm, from orchard care and house renovation to deer fencing and organic certification. We have been busy finishing up the farm business plan and preparing for our upcoming community meeting. We have also received a number of new memberships, and would like to extend a warm welcome to those who've joined the Haliburton Community Organic Farm Society over the last few months.

Haliburton Community Organic Farm Society

Your Board of Directors: Tina Baynes, Diana Chown, Tim Ewanchuck, Karen Hurley, Catherine Jacobsen, Brenda Laliberte, Gracie MacDonald, Emily MacNair, Susan Sinkinson, John Watts, and Kevin Weir.

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Organic Certification Process Underway for Haliburton

The Haliburton Community Organic Farm Society has applied to obtain certified organic status for Haliburton Farm through the Islands Organic Producers Association (IOPA). Farms certified by IOPA must adhere to standards set



Collecting soil samples on the farm – a first step toward certification

by COABC (Certified Organic Associations of BC), as well as additional IOPA guidelines. These guidelines reflect the following approach to organic farming:

Organic agriculture is both a philosophy and a way of farming. The main focus is maintaining sustainable, productive farms based on living soil ecosystems. The farmer's role is to use and support a community of organisms, both plant and animal, that maintain and build the soil, minimize predation by unwanted pests and weed plants, and produce healthy, nutritious food for the farm and community. The process is as important as the

product, and the quality and sustainability of life is paramount.

-IOPA handout

The IOPA guidelines and COABC organic standards regulate many aspects of farm operations to ensure that this approach to organic farming is carried out. Requirements include using non-toxic construction materials and organic soil amendments on-site, employing preventative and low-impact methods of pest and disease control, managing soil and crop systems for best health, and maintaining uncultivated areas on the farm as

wildlife habitat. Use of genetically modified seed is also explicitly prohibited.

The first step in the certification process involves researching the farming history of the land, defining our own agricultural methods and philosophy, and obtaining soil and water tests. Haliburton Farm will then be inspected by an independently-accredited verification officer. IOPA's certification committee will use her report, as well as information submitted in our application, to assign us a status. In our first year we will be get a transitional status and it is possible that we could be certified organic as early as June 2004!

Organic Farming at Haliburton – What will it look like?

What is the typical image that urban dwellers envision when we think of a farm? A children's story book barn with a single horse, cow and chicken, nestled in a golden corn field? The pumpkin patch we visited with our kindergarten class at Hallowe'en? Hectares upon hectares of genetically modified canola fields, ploughed by mammoth tractors on the Canadian Prairies?

Perhaps, more likely, we think of the fields of cabbages, potatoes, strawberries, and onions alongside the Pat Bay Highway and Saanich roads in summertime. But how exactly does this image correspond with our vision for small scale, sustainable, organic farming at Haliburton?

Small, organic farms are a species of their own on the Saanich Peninsula, though perhaps best described as some sort of hybrid between a backyard garden and a conventional field. Last year, I had the good fortune to apprentice with a grower on her certified organic farm in Central Saanich. Rebecca Jehn cultivates a one-acre market garden with over forty different fruit and vegetable crops. Produce is harvested virtually year-round and sold via a weekly home delivery program, at the Moss St. Market

in Fairfield, and to local restaurants. Working with Rebecca allowed me to observe first-hand the challenges and rewards of organic farming, and gain a deeper appreciation for this gentle, effective system of food production.



My impression of the beauty and success of organic farming on a small scale incorporates two themes: *diversity* and *efficiency*. Diversity is achieved on a few different levels at Rebecca's farm. Continuous planting of crops throughout the year provides for the ongoing harvest of an ever-changing selection of produce. Consequently, there is no shortage in variety of fresh, vitamin-packed, raw materials

for the imaginative and health-conscious chef. Crops are planted in 60 ft. rows, each spaced just far enough apart for a small rototiller to weed between them. Eighty or 90 such rows, two or three of each crop, create a mosaic of plants of different shapes and sizes at the height of the growing season. At any given time in the field, at least one crop is flowering, another has gone to seed, and any number of other plants are just beginning to leaf. This diversity provides varied habitat for numerous other creatures, including quail, hawks and eagles that prey on the quail, flocks of seed-munching birds, garter snakes, frogs, insects, and soil invertebrates too numerous to mention.

My favourite example of this pairing of crop and wildlife diversity struck me as soon as I arrived at Rebecca's in April, when the lower half of the field was bare and still, save a startling raucous in a flowering winter crop of lacinato kale. All the valley's bees must have been contained within this small swath of yellow, to make such a noise possible. Throughout the season, the successive flowering of crops in different areas of the garden provided a roving pollinator haven. I delighted in the solitary bees, flies, moths and butterflies that congregated on the brussels sprouts, flowering thyme, and raspberry blossoms. No doubt the crops also appreciated the continuous pollination services these critters provided.

In the process of nurturing diversity in food plants and wild creatures, small, organic farms also demonstrate a remarkably efficient means of food production. This 'ecological efficiency' results from the relatively low levels of inputs required in relation to the high per acre productivity of market gardens. In contrast to the large amounts of fossil fuels used in conventional farming to run heavy machinery, and produce chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, the major input on Rebecca's farm is *okara*, the nitrogen-rich by-product of a local, organic tofu processing facility. Inputs of fossil fuels used for transportation are also drastically

reduced when food is grown and sold locally. Produce from Rebecca's farm travels about 25 km by van to reach the tables of the most distant home delivery customers, well under the North American average of 1500 miles, generally by diesel truck.

On her single acre, Rebecca produces enough food to provide a weekly produce bag for ten families for 42 weeks of the year, with surplus to sell to restaurants and other markets. Effectively, a sustainable job has been created with a single acre of farmland devoted to organic market gardening. On average, only one job per 80 acres is created through conventional farming. Additionally, an estimated 100,000 new jobs could be created in Canada if we ate even as much local food as we did 25 years ago.

The efficiency of small scale, organic farming is not always readily apparent to those who encounter this style of food production for the first time. My oldest friend came to visit Rebecca's farm one day, and almost immediately asked "Doesn't she want to get more land?" "I don't think so," I replied, not sure how to convey in a single sentence the magnitude of labour required to hand-weed 5000 feet of crops, nor the great quantity of food that this seemingly small farm generates.

Immersed in the abundance and vibrance of Rebecca's farm, I developed a growing feeling of peace and security, knowing that, year after year, this one acre so close to my home bursts forth with the tastiest, healthiest, freshest food available. Unfortunately, the bags of lethargic carrots I have resorted to buying since my own ran out in early winter now leave me hungrier than ever for local, organic food.

The story of my apprenticeship highlights only one of the many small, organic farms on the Saanich Peninsula, South Island, and Gulf Islands, each one personalized by the labour and love of a different grower. Haliburton will soon begin to take on its own form of this gentle, restorative agriculture.

--Catherine Jacobsen