Saugeen River CSA

Newsletter

December 2013

Happy winter everyone!

This newsletter is primarily about the farming practices at the Saugeen River CSA and our certification process. But first I would like to remind all existing members that **if you are interested in a share for this coming 2014 season to send me at least a $100 first payment in January** to reserve your spot. There are over 20 people on a waiting list for the coming year, and I will call them early February and then it will be first come first served until the CSA is full. The CSA share price will remain the same for the coming season: $350 for a small share, $565 for a medium, and $830 for a large.

One of the reasons I ask for payments so early in the year is that there are a number of large expenses that come early on. At the beginning of January I try to get the seed order done. The seed companies are sending their catalogues earlier and earlier it seems, and I have found if I don't order that early they are often sold out of some of the varieties that work well for our farm. Also in February I need to make sure we have enough firewood and propane to heat the greenhouse to start our seedlings, as well as have all the greenhouse supplies in place for starting plants at the beginning of March. If for some reason you are really not able to get a first payment to me in early January, but are definitely interested in a share, let me know and I will make sure a spot is reserved for you.

Now for the certification: our farm certification is a little unique, so I feel it needs a bit more explanation. From 1997 until 2010 the Saugeen River CSA was certified Biodynamic by Demeter Canada. When the certification came up for renewal in 2011 I thought it was an opportunity to explore an alternative. Demeter Canada is a small certifying body affiliated with Demeter International, the global organization that connects Biodynamic certifiers worldwide. In 2008 the Canadian government instituted the National Standard for Organic Certifying Bodies. Demeter Canada is too small a certifying body to pay the fees for accreditation by the National Organic Standard. So any farms that are certified by Demeter Canada but need a government approved seal are double certified by a second organization, for of course more money.

The paperwork and fees have become more and more directed to farms that were seeking to market their products internationally, or at least inter-provincially. The international certification system seemed to be overkill for our farm that markets only to people who we see face to face. What the certification is meant to do is let the consumer, who is usually very disconnected from the producer, to know something about the farming practices that go into the food they are consuming. This is what the CSA model is supposed to be all about, reconnecting people to their food, so we should be able to do way better at informing the customers than any national certification program can do. So that was what this new certification model is meant to do. So each year, I invite a CSA member and an Owen Sound Market customer representative to

come to the farm and go through an inspection process. The report that they wrote for the 2013 season is now up on the farm website on the "Newsletters" page. What I found out last year that was interesting was that there is actually a global movement of farms doing similar things. It has been labeled "Participatory Guarantee Systems" or PGS. These community based certification systems have been recognized by IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements). Farms that are doing this are, like us, just marketing to their local communities and don't see the purpose in paying the large fees necessary for international accreditation.

Having been certified for so many years, and having sat on the Demeter Canada board of directors for 3 years, and been on the certification committee for 10 years, I kind of know what the certification process is like. One of the key components of a farm inspection is disclosing what materials have been brought onto the farm for production. This includes seeds, animal feed and supplements, fertility sources, greenhouse supplies, cleaning materials, insect and pest control materials, and fuel and energy sources. I provided a list of what I brought into the farm to the "inspection team." Here's the list:

Seeds: To be certified by an accredited body, vegetable growers have to show the attempt to obtain organic seeds. The nature of market gardening is that there are so many vegetable varieties in existence (we actually grow over 200 varieties!). There is a limit to what varieties are available as organic seed, and each grower has certain varieties that they have found works for them. So it is not expected that all seeds be organic, but you need to show you are trying organic ones out and have a significant percentage as organic. The seeds of course cannot be treated with any fungicides or insecticides. Our farm is actually one of the leading farms in Ontario that are integrating seed saving and organic production vegetable growing. I was invited to Windsor in November to be a presenter on this topic at the Bring Food Home conference. In addition to our own seeds, we probably use about 75% organic seeds.

Animal feed and supplements: The main forage for our cows and horses is pasture from May to October, and hay from November to April. The 2012 season was so dry we had very little hay of our own to harvest, so purchased some from a Demeter certified farm and an organic certified farm. When doing heavy work, the horses get a grain supplement, which came from the Saugeen Country Yogurt farm (Demeter and Ecocert certified). They also get a trace mineral salt block supplement from the CO-OP, which does not contain corn as a base. Our chickens and ducks (for our own use) get grain from Loonsong Gardens (uncertified Biodynamic), and certified organic mix from the CO-OP.

Fertility sources: We only use compost made from our own animal manures and bedding. The bedding is straw from a couple of different organic farms, since we are not growing grain ourselves. The other issue we talked about regarding fertility is the Ontario Nutrient Management Act. This Act was introduced by the Ontario government after the E-coli incident in Walkerton back maybe 10 years ago or so. Farm animal manures were implicated then. One of the concerns that were raised related to overstocking farms. This means having too many animals for a certain amount of land. Ironically, this is the central question of Biodynamics, finding the right kinds and number of animals for a given piece of land and the right kind and quantity of feed for the animals. This Biodynamic ideal is thrown on its head with the Nutrient

Management Act. Whereas Biodynamics sees manure as immeasurably valuable as a source of fertility, the Nutrient Management Act sees manure as a waste product that needs enough space to dispose of it! The Nutrient Management Act also has its particular definition of "compost" and "manure." Compost is defined as organic waste that has been through a heating process where it has a temperature of at least 77 degrees Celsius for 14 days. If this is not documented to have happened, then what you have is the equivalent of "raw manure." Any raw manure must be applied at least 120 days before a crop is harvested for human consumption. Now, there are two reasons this Act is actually meaningless for us. First, it is an Act and not a law. The only place it is enforced is when a farm is applying for a building permit. So if someone wants to build a 5,000 head hog barn, but only has 10 acres of land, the Act can refuse the permit, as there needs to be at least 1 acre of land for every animal unit (1 cow is 1 animal unit, 6 pigs equals 1 animal unit). This is for sure a good thing… at least it's a start. The other reason it doesn't apply to our farm is that there is an under 30 animal unit exemption. So since we only have about 10 animal units on our 80 acre farm, we don't have to comply at all. However, the way I apply our compost (which does go through a heating phase, though I don't take the temperature enough to document what is required), which by their definition would be considered raw manure, I apply it in the late summer just before seeding the cover crops to get the ground ready for the next years vegetable crops. So there is the fall, winter and spring and sometimes the summer before any crop is harvested, so it remains well within the requirements of the Act.

Greenhouse supplies: The Biodynamic ideal is to have as little inputs on the farm as possible, therefore the Demeter certification requires that 75% by weight of your seedling mixture be from farm produced material. Even though we are no longer Demeter certified, the mix we use has always met this standard. What we add to our own sifted compost and sifted soil is untreated peat, vermiculite and a small amount of lime.

Cleaning materials: The only cleaning materials that apply to us is the hydrogen peroxide that we use to clean our vegetable bins and vegetable wash tubs.

Insect and pest control: We use no chemical or even natural sprays for pests or weeds, but we do use barriers. For insect control, mainly flea beetles, and cucumber beetles, we use a floating row cover that goes over the crops susceptible to damage from these insects. The row cover lets air, light and rain through, and stays on while the plants are young and tender, but comes off once they are big enough to fend for themselves. We also use landscape fabric, a woven plastic ground cover to prevent weeds from growing in vine crops (squash and melons). The landscape fabric is reusable and porous to allow moisture and air to exchange from the soil. These crops tend to get weedy since their growth habit does not allow cultivation at later stage, but still allows weeds to come up. I'm hoping that as our crop rotation gradually lowers our weed pressure in the garden, this may not be necessary, but for now it is a major labour saving tool.

Energy and fuel use: This is a concern for Demeter farms, but is not looked at in organic certification. Demeter tries to encourage a decrease on dependency on fossil fuels and outside power needs. The measures we have taken here are long term. When we built the root cellar, it was specifically designed to be usable for summer and winter as cold storage without the need

for electricity. Our greenhouse is heated with primarily a wood stove, but a propane furnace is used as back up. We are also gradually using the draft horses more and more each year to cut back on our tractor usage. We still are using our tractor for the entire hay making process, primarily due to labour focus during the busy time of the year.

In addition to what we bring onto the farm, a Biodynamic certification process looks at overall farm management. This includes overall farm fertility, crop rotation, and use of the Biodynamic preparations. Perhaps I'll go into a more detailed description of this in a future newsletter. If you have any questions about the farm management, please feel free to ask.

Warm wishes for your winter,

Cory, Tanya, Stefano, and Georgia