

Organic Pursuit Takes Time

Editor:

Lancaster Farming reports that Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro wants the state to be the nation's leader in organic farming.

That sounds like a laudable goal, but organic farming cannot be rushed like a political campaign. Organic begins with building soil health. Conversion to an organic system of farming is more than a simple practice of input substitution and mechanically following a set of rules to qualify as USDA Certified Organic.

To be done well, organic farming requires a change of heart and mindset of the farmer. They need to move beyond chemical treatments to a biologically based system that embraces natural ecology. It takes time, education and training for organic producers to change their approach and thinking about the farm as a living system.

Organic farming is a truly remarkable system and social movement. But the USDA National Organic Program now allows hydroponics and neglects the importance of animals on

pasture. This has given rise to the Real Organic program add on certification as an attempt to correct this diversion from its original intention.

The early roots of the organic movement can be traced back to more than a century in the pioneering writings of F. H. King, Albert Howard, Lord Northbourne, Eve Balfour, Weston A. Price, Edward Faulkner, and others. The great accomplishment of Jerome Rodale and others associated with the Rodale Institute was to publish Organic Gardening and Farming magazine and conduct organic research and demonstrations. These efforts served to teach and train new generations about organic farming as an ecological system.

I was raised on an organic farm in the 1950s when organic was shunned and very much a fringe movement. My early organic farm boy experience along with years of education and agricultural research have given me a unique perspective as a professor of soil science.

At Rutgers University, I teach a course in Principles of Organic Crop Production. Besides teaching, I operate a small organic farm

in Ringoes, New Jersey, that is certified by Pennsylvania Certified Organic (PCO).

Effective practice of organic farming requires more than a superficial knowledge of the USDA rules for organic certification. I think there is much that can be learned from reading the foundational writings of organic pioneers. Telling the history of the organic movement helps create an awareness of the interplay between science, social values, economics and the recalcitrance of established organizations to adopt new approaches.

For educational purposes, I published several articles about the history of the organic farming movement. They can be found with a web search for these titles:

- A History of Organic Farming: Transitions from Sir Albert Howard's War in the Soil to USDA National Organic Program
- Securing Fresh Food from Fertile Soil, Challenges to the Organic and Raw Milk Movements
- Perspectives on History, Philosophy, and Sociology of Organic Farming

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