

Panel Discussion

Karen Davidge—Good Spring Farm, Keswick Ridge, NB

Good Spring Farm has been on the go since 1980, and in 1987 we were among the first six farms certified organic by OCIA, an accredited certification organization in Atlantic Canada. Regarding my own background...I didn't grow up on a farm. I never learned that I couldn't do it with organic agriculture. In my mind, from my university days I always felt that we were in a fantastic position with modern science to bring the best of the old ways together with the best of the new ways and come up with absolutely superb production practices. Well, my idealism got hit about the head and neck a little bit over the years, but we have stuck with it and I think that we are proving it at Good Spring Farm.

We are a seed potato-producing farm of 3 ½ acres. We're small, but we have our potatoes on about a 5-year rotation with small fruits, mixed vegetables, and pastured poultry. We're a closed poultry unit. We do our own breeding and hatching. We sell primarily at the Fredericton Farmers' Market; we've been there 24 years. We also do a certain amount of wholesaling. Our big sign at the farm gate ought to be "Prevention, Prevention, Prevention." We don't want any problems to begin with, so we bend over backwards to find ways to identify systems that will give us a "heads up", that will raise the red flags to say, "There's trouble coming. Are you prepared to deal with it?"

At our farm it has proven quite interesting. For instance, we have a battle with weeds the same as other producers, and we're getting better at it as we go on through the years. We have, I think, made substantial progress in things like disease control and pest control. In disease control with late blight, although I can use a product called Parasol (a Cu product)—I used to be able to use Kocide, but that was removed from the materials list a few years ago—we've ended up using very little of it. Since last year we didn't spray at all. The year before we only sprayed once. So we're not having to worry about any Cu buildup because of our rotation.

When we look at what's happening on our farm, we know there are things that I don't necessarily understand that are happening in the soil for disease control. But I know that there are other things. For instance, our rows are planted somewhat further apart; we don't have a closure of canopy between the rows. We have slightly greater spacing in the placing of our seed pieces. So again, more air circulation around the plant. We're on a slope; we're on a south-facing slope. We're on Keswick Ridge. We get lots of wind. We have air circulation; we have flow of air up and down the slopes. We know that that's helping and impacting. These are the kinds of things that you, as producers, whether you're organic or conventional producers, can be looking at. We know that there are microclimates on our farm that are different from down the ridge. Our apple trees bloom a week later than those down the ridge. We can't apply exactly the same practices.

For insect control we rely primarily on rotation. We've used Novodor in the past and it's been very effective. We're now in a situation that OCIA isn't going to allow further use of Novodor because of some of the inert ingredients in it which don't meet the standards. So we're preparing for the "what if's" this year. We do use a propane flamer; it's very effective, and it means that usually, if we have to use Novodor it's one spray and maybe a couple of spot sprays. In fact, we've had some years where we've ended up just doing some spot sprays of Bt and not having a whole spray.

One of the other things that I think is important about Good Spring Farm is that my husband and I persevere. In the light of things that are challenges, we believe that there is always an answer, and there is an answer that will apply in our system. But the biggest challenge is to find it. I want to emphasize, too, that if you look at the “why not’s”, you’ll get focused on the “why not’s”—why should I not be involved in organic production? If you get focused on the fears, then you will stay focused on the fears and you will miss the opportunities. So that’s a very important thing that I want to leave with you.

Some of the other challenges would be the availability of products. I’ve already alluded to the situation with Novodor. So regulatory approval of proven products, whether they be manufactured, biological, etc. that will meet the standards here...and we don’t want to fall into the trap that just because they’re approved in the US that they’re automatically the best for us here. I want to qualify that. Weed, insect, and disease control methods that will meet the standards that we can use when we lost our windows of time due to poor weather. For instance, last year we got hit with a very extended spell of rain and we couldn’t get in with equipment. By the time the rain stopped and the ground dried out enough for weed control and that sort of thing, boys, that’s awfully hard, and I’ll tell you the RoundUp container that I see at some other places sometimes can look very nice. But that’s where you persevere—you don’t let those times get you.

Infrastructure...the organic industry is still relatively young, we’re not large, and we need better infrastructure to help one another, whether it’s processing, storage needs, that sort of thing.

Comments on some of the earlier sessions...they have been excellent sessions. I’d like to say that we need to be careful not to get focused just on yields and stop looking at the whole picture of disease resistance, taste, and consumers’ increasing knowledge of specific varieties for specific cooking uses (they’re becoming very knowledgeable; they want to be taught, and they’re the ones that keep us in business) and, among other things, environmental impact. We have to stop studying and looking at agricultural practices as a series of unrelated boxes. It’s just not going to fly. And it’s exciting that as time rolls on, research is showing us that more and more. Another challenge at the moment for my husband and I at Good Spring Farm is variety availability. A lot of the varieties that they’re just scrambling for and we can’t meet the demand for have been dropped now by our seed potato farm. That has forced us into a situation where with some of these varieties that have proved to be very profitable for us, we’re having to go back to tissue culture, plantlets, and minitubers, and that really increases your cost of production. But, fortunately, we’re getting the prices that we can justify those kinds of costs.

Two things that I’d like to say that would be very helpful would be that conventional producers would start using some of the proven products more extensively so that suppliers and regulatory agencies would be more open to having those available. A lot of these products’ successful use depends on good scouting in the fields. That is something that conventional producers, simply by the volume that they produce and that they use products...I want to encourage you that when they work, they will not only work for me—they’ll work for you also. But you’ve got to scout, and you should be running trials. Think for yourself—as producers, you have a good head on your shoulders.

Something that I realized this summer with the research project at our place was the value of a mini weather station. My climate, as I said, at my end of the Keswick Ridge, is different than somewhere else. I can now see much greater value in having an affordable mini weather station

so that I can do better forecasting, whether I'm forecasting weeds—emergence of various weeds as we have more data available to us, for disease control, and that sort of thing. So I would like to throw that out there.

Under control for the Colorado potato beetle, I spoke about Novodor and the flamer. We have also discovered a huge increase in the variety of predator insects at our farm, whether it's lady bugs or spine soldier beetles. But with the spine soldier beetle, the life cycle doesn't jibe with the Colorado potato beetle. They come on strong after we have the larval stages going like crazy with the potato beetles. Just to say that there are opportunities there too...