



Why we Transitioned to Organic

Welcome and thank you for taking the time and expressing an interest in OCIA International. My name is Jack Geiger. I have been a member of OCIA International and the Eastern Kansas OCIA Chapter for 27 years. I have served on committees at both the International and chapter levels as well as serving on both Board of Directors.

My father Jake first certified with OCIA in 1989. Over the years we have seen many changes in the organic sector. What started out as a philosophical movement has become a major industry and international market force. OCIA is one force within organic production that has not changed. We continue to advocate for organic producers. Our Board of Directors is still made up of actual organic producers. We still offer local interaction, outreach, and mentoring through our chapter system of local organic producers.

People come to organic production for many different reasons. Undertaking the transition to organic production can be very daunting. We offer the following stories for illustration and encouragement.

The organic markets continue to expand and offer solid opportunities for future growth. We encourage you to contact us if we may assist you in your organic endeavors. Thank you again for taking an interest in OCIA as your organic certification agency and we would like to welcome you to our family of businesses.

Jack Geiger
President (2015/2016)

OCIA Family Farmer Spotlight

Written by Demetria Stephens



Terry Sheehan

The United Nations made 2015 the International Year of Soils with healthy soils being the basis for healthy food production as one of its key messages.

A key part of the organic agricultural movement started with soil building.

“Because organic farmers do not use synthetic nutrients to restore degraded soil, they must concentrate on building and maintaining soil fertility primarily through their basic farming practices,” according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Terry Sheehan shows how the wasteful nature of cattle can build topsoil on his Westlock, Alberta, farm and ranch. Grass creates an amazing amount of thatch, he said. Thatch is like grass that eventually ends up higher than a sidewalk so you might think the sidewalk was built too low, but he said that’s grass building soil.

Terry rotates his 200-base cattle herd over fields and pastures for several years where they stomp thatch into the ground and leave manure. This increases organic matter and makes soil look brown, rather than black, when he plows it, he said.

Plowing is part of a multi-year, rotational pasture plan. He cultivates about 25 percent of his roughly 1,800 acres. He said his fields start as a hay crop, such as alfalfa. Grass takes over as an alfalfa field gets old and then the field becomes cattle pasture. In about the seventh year, they get torn up as a seedbed for oats.

Terry’s organic practices can fetch about \$1 more for his calves from buyers where demand is outpacing supply for organic products. He said the premium wasn’t there when he first certified organic with the Organic Crop Improvement Association in 1997. The reason to certify then was a health aspect or just because you thought it was the right thing to do, he said.

He was already thinking of certifying organic when OCIA’s Alberta chapter held a meeting in a nearby town in the late 1990s. Pesticides “didn’t agree with him,” he said, after years of spraying. He suspected the 2-4-D herbicide was the top offender. He said he still feels sick walking across a sprayed lawn in a town.

Cattle grazing on his crop ground cleaned the land enough he didn’t have to spray it and that made his transition to organic certification easier. People involved in the OCIA Alberta chapter at the time mentored him, too.

Nearly two decades later, Terry mentors new and potential farmers as a founding board member of the OCIA Chapter Members Association Canada - along with Kevin Gingras, Cherylynn Bos and Marg Laberge. It’s a new chapter in Canada that assists members from any province with low-cost mentorship.

“We encourage interested people to become supportive members of our organization,” he said. “And in doing so, they could meet existing organic producers and get ideas for their own future in the organic industry, whatever that might be.”

Terry finished his second term on the OCIA International Board of Directors in 2015 where he promoted the idea that “anyone can be an organic farmer,” he said, “even if you don’t come from a farming background.”

Buying or renting a small parcel of land, which might come with a place to live, can be a starting point for a young couple who want to get their foot in the door, he said.

Terry is sticking with his cattle. There’s incredible demand if you’re willing to finish cattle yourself, he said.

“There’s no problem as far as demand goes,” he said, “but there’s lots of room for more production.”

Driscoll Farm

Farmers are like professional gamblers, with the weather being a big unpredictable risk factor.

Planting genetically engineered crops, a factor for farmers starting in the 1990s, is a risk some won't take. Genetically engineered corn turned Elliott Driscoll, 67, to organic agriculture on his family-run Walridge Farms in Williamsburg, Iowa. It was the spring of 1996, the year that Monsanto Company took over the DEKALB seed company, he said. A seed seller came to him and would give him this "new thing" that was Roundup Ready corn seed, if he would plant it. He did plant, on a 50-acre field that was used for pasture. It got taken over by weeds. Roundup Ready corn would allow Elliott to spray glyphosate, a synthetic herbicide and kill weeds, but not the crop.

Elliott said he remembered thinking, "Man, this is a good way to get rid of Canadian thistle and quack grass."

Elliott and his four sons chopped a lot of corn silage for their cattle that year, about 400 acres, starting with the Roundup Ready corn. So it was put first in the back of a bunker silo. That winter, they had a tub grinder come in that would grind 20 big round bales of one kind of hay and five of another, to make a total feed ration. They loaded it in a feed wagon and put in about half corn silage, half a mix of hay. It was business as usual until Elliott went out to feed his purebred Black Angus cattle one mid-February morning and saw six aborted calves.

"And I took notice really quick," he said.

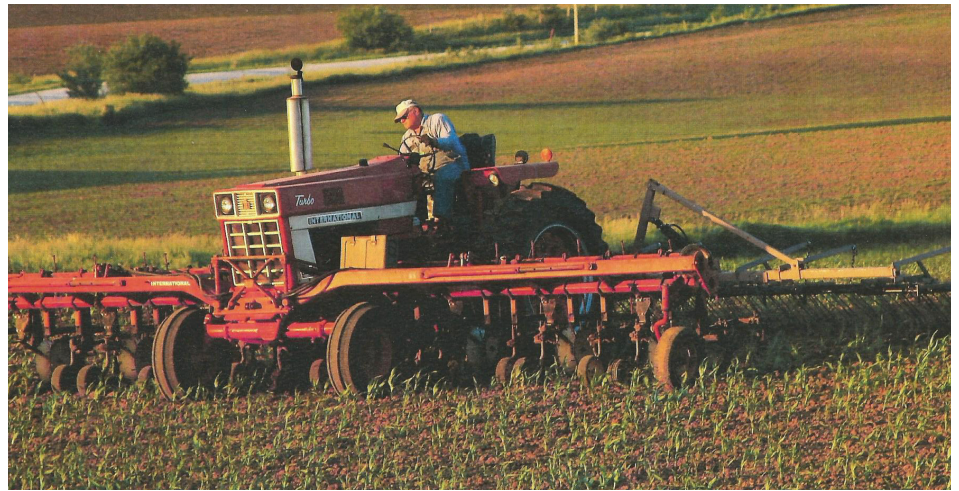
His feed mix had some oatlage, so he said his first thought was nitrates, but they just used straight corn silage that day. They found 14 more aborted calves the next morning.

"And we got real serious about it," he said.

They called a veterinarian. While they tried to come up with the cause, the abortions continued and they kept feeding only corn silage. A team of veterinarians from Iowa State University ran tests all day on the fifth day of the abortions, but stood in Elliott's shop at the end of the day without a cause.

He said one asked, "Was any of the corn silage Bt?" Referring to *Bacillus thuringiensis* corn that is a genetically engineered crop to kill insects that feed on it. Elliott told him, "No."

After the team left, Elliott thought about his feed source and realized it was at back of the bunker, at the Roundup Ready corn. One veterinarian said that the Roundup Ready corn wouldn't make a difference. They never came up with the cause, but Elliott quit feeding that corn and the abortions stopped. The six-generation farm lost just short of 50 calves that spring.



"I decided then, that's enough of that," he said.

He joined the Iowa 3 chapter of the Organic Crop Improvement Association that year, 1997, and requested 40 acres for certification to the OCIA International Certification Standards. The 104-year-old farm had neighboring farms added over time to become about 1,500 acres that took 10 years to transition to organic. He transitioned fields as he went through his crop rotation that includes sod, corn, soybeans, a small grain like oats or some rye, clover, alfalfa and pasture.

Along with being a certifier, OCIA is a membership organization that features speakers at its Annual General Membership Meeting on issues important to the association. Don Huber, professor emeritus of plant pathology at Purdue University, spoke at OCIA's 2013 annual meeting on the environmental and health impacts of glyphosate and genetically engineered crops. Elliott could relate to this.

"After all these years," Elliott said, "Don Huber is the one who's come across pretty much proof of what I've suspected all along."

The impact of Elliott's certified organic status has extended beyond his animal's health.

"I'll never forget the first year I did have a certified crop," he said.

He remembered pulling out of the field with his tractor and cultivator, shutting it off and closing a gate. It was the first time he contracted acres; 40 acres of corn for \$3.65 a bushel while the non-organic price was \$1.80 a bushel. He said he thought he should look over his shoulder for a sheriff, thinking, "This is like stealing." Now he sells 100 percent of his corn and about 60 percent or 70 percent of soybeans to several large Amish settlements that have a lot of livestock.

He was fortunate with yields, he said. His best year of corn was 186 bushels an acre, but the weather factor came into play in 2013 when his corn made 110 bushels an acre. It was wet in the spring and then the water "just got shut off," he said.

Animals are important, too. The Driscoll Farm finishes 30 to 40 head of cattle organically every year and markets them as non-organic because his meat lockers aren't certified. His farm is the home of the oldest purebred Hampshire hogs still in existence the United States.

The farm is level to gently rolling, almost all in one area. They are fortunate to have neighbors who won't plant genetically engineered crops next to his fields. This helps protect his crops from cross-pollination, he said. His oldest daughter, Veronica, 42, married a non-organic farmer four miles away who farms with his brothers.

Elliott and his wife Rita, 67, have three other daughters: Theresa, 40, Mary Ann, 33, and Eileen, 29, live away from the farm. Their sons work in agricultural fields. Joe, 37, is on the farm full time. The other boys have other businesses, too. John, 39, runs a hardware store, Jim, 34, runs a welding business and Jerry, 31, teaches high school and community college vocational agriculture. Jerry promotes organic to his students and several are in the process of convincing their parents to try organics.

"Everybody owns some of their own land and then we farm it all together," Elliott said.

The OCIA Family Spotlight is a series of stories about OCIA members, in celebration of the International Year of Family Farming.



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