

Adding sustainable value by selling direct

by Hugh Maynard

Dennis Vriend has no shortage of market potential; he only wishes he had a longer growing season to take advantage of the demand for fresh, organic vegetables in northern Alberta.

Vriend, his certified organic market garden operation perched on the outer limits of the city of Edmonton, estimates that the province only produces 5% of the fresh vegetables that its' population consumes. He recounts offering brussel sprouts on the stalk last year at the city's farmers market: sold out. Half pound bags of spinach at \$1.25 each. Sold out.

"Consumers just can't get enough of this stuff," Vriend says about the potential for the organic vegetable market. But producing quality and selling 85% of that at the retail level, which brings in as much as \$30,000 per acre, are the essential ingredients to making vegetable production profitable in such a northern climate. He sets up shop at the farmers' market every Saturday throughout the year, plus Tuesdays in the summertime, with his wife Ruth and son Dan who is leaving his present employment to work on the farm full-time this coming summer.

Vriend hires 10 full-time people and another 6 three-quarters time for peak periods in order to cater to demand. The farm has eight acres in full production, with another three as "fertilizer acres" - sown to green manure awaiting certification. From that area, he produces up to 35 different crops, ranging from root crops to small berries to summer vegetables and fresh herbs. He has also built a refrigerated storage unit so that he can ensure year-round supply of as many vegetables as possible, which are mostly root crops and some squash during wintertime.

"There's not a week from May to November when there's not something new at our stall," says Vriend. "We've tailored the crops on the farm to retailing at the farmers' market." He adds that not all the crops are money makers but the variety helps attract quality-conscious customers.

Managed by his son, Vriend has also started a sideline producing certified organic seed for what he hopes will be a blossoming market. So far they are producing seed for potatoes, carrots, squash and a number of brassicas; some is used on the farm and some is sold commercially to other producers. Other crops have been abandoned either because the volume of seed required is too small or because there have been cross-pollination problems.

Lost opportunity

Even without considering the value-added benefits of retail marketing, Vriend feels that Alberta is lagging behind in developing sustainable agricultural alternatives, despite government talk of targeting vegetable production at 75% of demand through better utilization of the province's abundant natural gas resource in greenhouses.

As a past-president of The Sustainable Agriculture Association of Alberta (SAA), Vriend says that there has been little acceptance amongst the province's farmers that things need to change. He offers as evidence the fact that there are approximately 600 certified organic growers in B.C., 500 in Saskatchewan, yet only 60 in Alberta.

"We sweated and butted our heads up against the wall," he says about trying to organize the first provincial conference on sustainable agriculture in February of this year. Vriend contrasts that effort with a phone call he just received in search of 500 tonnes a month of organic wheat; the market is there, he notes, but the supply is not.

Vriend cites his own move to total elimination of soil conditioners and nutritional inputs, of how sustainable methods can be used in agriculture. Barnyard manure has been used in the transition period to organic farming but was phased out last year, relying instead entirely on rotation, composted crop residues and green manures to meet the nutritional requirements of the crops. He knows that there will be difficulties but is "determined to make it work" in order to advance in his adherence to organic standards.

Try, try, try . . .

Vriend believes that with "careful adjusting and re-adjusting of the rotation program," soil reserves can be maintained without the manure or any other inputs. He cites sweet corn, a "heavy feeder", as an example of requiring preventative action before the next crop; seeding a green manure or adding additional compost will be necessary before planting a low feeding crop.

"I'm confident it's going to work but I'm not saying there won't be any problems," he said. More important to Vriend is the attitude of trying new cropping practices, and continuing to try despite initial failures.

"There are a lot of failures in organic farming because the variables are greater in number," he says, noting that there appears to be a double standard when compared against conventional agricultural methods. He points out that when a farmer applies garlic tea as an insecticide and it doesn't work, the method is judged as a failure; but pesticide applications also fail yet are not discounted in the same manner.

Vriend reflects on a group of Montana farmers who he says are doing research trials with no chemical inputs in no-till cropping: "Many have simply said it can't be done, but they will try and fail and try again until they get it right."