

The Gift of Community
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Gee, it was great to see everyone again! We held our first New York Certified Organic (NYCO) meeting of winter at the end of November, and the sense of joy of being back together was tangible.

Six organic grain growers formed this group about 10 years ago as an organic certification chapter. They could have been protective of their market advantage, refusing to teach others how to farm organically, but instead they shared their experiences freely with all who came to the meetings. Since then, NYCO has grown, become more inclusive and separated itself from a connection to any one certifier. Over the years, NYCO has developed into a strong, effective means to promote community, cooperation and friendship between New York organic farmers and to learn from each other and from other experts on various pertinent topics. We hold monthly meetings



during the winter and naturally, we all bring lots of food to share, for there's nothing better than good food to foster community! Our monthly newsletter, Tails and Tassels, is essentially a primer on organic farming, with far-ranging articles on practical agronomics, markets, organic livestock issues, changes in organic certification as we come into the Brave New NOP World, scientific studies, upcoming events, and news of our members.

The past 50 years have not been kind to a sense of community and cooperation among farmers. Our extension /university staff, agribusiness salespeople, farm magazines and the USDA have aggressively promoted the mantra to 'get bigger or get out'. But you know, they aren't making more farmland these days! The only way to get bigger is to take over your neighbor's farm and how can you truly cooperate and care about each other's success if you see him as a takeover candidate and he sees you as one too? Increasingly, bitter competition and isolation have become the way of life for many American farmers. This system assumes a world of scarcity where there is not enough to go around and where we must take some of our neighbor's share if we are to fill our own demands. In NYCO, we try to counter this with our message of abundance. There is plenty for all of us when we work together. We want our neighbors to thrive and prosper. NYCO has sought to promote the view that indeed, we all do better when we all do better.

In our experience, if farmers are going to be convinced to switch and stay with organics, there should be a dynamic synergism between three crucial things (1) AGRONOMICS - seeing that they can produce equally high quality crops and animals under organic management (2) MARKETING - being able to find good reliable markets for all their crops,

(3) COMMUNITY - knowing other organic farmers who are supportive, encouraging and successful.

At NYCO meetings, agronomics and marketing take equal share of attention. Most farmers really want to have clean, high yielding, good looking fields and healthy, good looking animals. We're funny like that! We care deeply about the quality of our farms, our animals and our crops - and about how other farmers view us. Many lifelong farmers 'define' themselves by how well their crops yield, how nice their fields look, how much milk their cows produce, this is at the core of their self-image. And they evaluate other farmers by the same criteria. If they can see that organic farmers in their area are producing fields that are of acceptable quality, then they are much more likely to consider it for themselves. But if they see weedy fields, weak crops, sloppy management, unhealthy animals, broken equipment, a messy farmyard, then they will probably want nothing to do with organics.

Having neighbors who are willing to teach, help, encourage and show that organic farming works is important. Doing it alone is tough. A farmer is much more likely to choose organics and stick with it if they feel the support and friendship from others who live closeby, ESPECIALLY if that support includes helping them find markets for their crops, particularly in the first years.

NYCO members are very open with each other about our markets. We freely discuss different buyers, what current prices are, which buyers are reliable, what products are the buyers looking for, is there the right infrastructure nearby to clean, process, store, handle the product? The more information that is shared without 'protecting proprietary advantage' and without unfriendly competition for markets, the stronger the group will be, but the tone has to be set by the leaders for this approach is contrary to the default setting for today's American farmer. If a farmer finds that there is a good reliable market for a particular product, they will generally figure out how to produce it.

The combination of marketing and local support seems to work best for organic grain and dairy farms, where proximity to other similar organic farms actually helps with marketing crops. A milk company is more interested in sending out a truck to several dairy farms in the area, a grain buyer is more likely to 'develop' a region when there are a number of farms and sizable acreage for successive years of similar size supply. Grain and milk travels in large trucks - to a point, more is better.

At our meeting in November, Dr. Bill Liebhardt from the Rodale Institute was kind enough to come speak to us. Bill is the retired chair of the Sustainable Agriculture program at the University of California at Davis, and is currently on a one year assignment at Rodale, reinvigorating their research program. The NYCO farmers were captivated by the highly pertinent research that Rodale has done over the past 20 years. The long-term systems comparison trial between legume-based organic, manure-based organic and conventional grain farming systems showed many worthwhile things, particularly that the yields varied little and in dry years, the organic system shone. The organic soils were higher in organic matter, had greater water infiltration and water holding capacity, and were more microbially active. For those of us firm believers in the organic system, this was music to our ears!

Then Bill turned the mirror on us with straight talk about the Achilles Heel of organics - weed control. There is plenty of evidence that organic farming improves the soil and is better for the environment, but unfortunately weed control on many organic farms is inconsistent. It can be very good, sometimes better than what can be obtained with a complex herbicide cocktail, or it can fail, and often the farmer does not really know what caused the difference. We don't like to hear this but it is undeniably true.

So, in answer to Bill's observation, what can we, as organic farmers, do to make organic weed control more consistent?

1. Input substitution does not work - there are no silver bullets! For those who switch to organics, thinking that all they have to do is eliminate chemicals and buy a cultivator, weed control is almost certain to fail. Organic farming is a totally different system of thinking and planning. Crop rotations, or lack thereof, that 'work' under heavy pesticides and synthetic fertilizers are often totally inappropriate under organic conditions. Conventional agriculture's inattention to soil health spells disaster in an organic system. If we don't change our way of thinking and planning, it is hardly a surprise that an organic farmer might have weed control success one year and failure the next, and have no idea why. Organic agriculture is a system where all parts are interrelated. Weed control is integrally linked to soil fertility and condition, which is integrally linked to crop rotation. We, and the scientists now studying organics, should not consider any one factor in isolation, failing to take into account that whatever we do to one part of the system affects everything else.

2. The heart of organic weed control success is cultural, not mechanical. A good cultivator may be needed to clean up residual weed problems but it should be seen as only the last line of defense. Far more important are various cultural practices that limit the size and type of the weed population from the very start. The main point in cultural practices is to create as large a differential as possible between the size and vigor of the crop and the size and vigor of the weeds. A well-planned, diverse, crop rotation, active soil fertility management, attention to sanitation, using high quality seed of well adapted varieties, and well adjusted and appropriate equipment will go far in creating this differential. Wise use of allelopathic and deep shading crops can put existing weed problems at a disadvantage. Cultural weed control is a system of thinking and of planning approaches that use many interrelated factors to your advantage.

3. Define your reasonable weed control expectations. Perfect scorched earth between the rows might not be necessary or even desirable. Indeed, don't forget that this isn't always the norm with chemical weed control either! We believe that rating weed control with a simple one to five scale, only recording how many weeds are killed, is not adequate to evaluate weed control wholistically. A sound weed control program must meet the following criteria (1) no yield loss from weed pressure, (2) no quality loss from weed pressure, (3) cost effective, (4) safe for farmer, the crop, and the environment, (5) sustainable over many years. Each crop and even each field will require different approaches to meet these goals, but if your overall weed control program meets these criteria, then don't second-guess yourself.

When we farmed with chemicals, we found that our weed control program consistently failed on the last three points and all too often, it failed on all five. Today we are happy to report that our weed control is meeting all 5 criteria on most of our farm each year and on all of it in good years. We are still striving to constantly improve as we learn more about weeds and expect that we will continue to do so for as long as we farm.

4. Timing is critical. It doesn't take much attention to control weeds in Roundup Ready soybeans, but it is not so simple in organic farming. Mechanical weed control must begin long before the weeds are visible. If you can see the weeds from your pickup truck window, there's a good chance that you are too late. Timing can be somewhat less precise if your cultural practices are sound. If you are relying solely on a cultivator for weed control and then it rains for days just when you must cultivate, you can have a real disaster. But if the weed population has already been reasonably controlled by cultural practices, you will have a little more flexibility with timing.

5. Intelligent observation and creativity are essential. What your neighbor is doing might not work as well on your farm. Your crop and weed histories, soil conditions, weather, and your farm's economic needs are undoubtedly different. It is very useful to learn what works for others, but you and your farm are unique. You won't know what works on your farm unless you are out there, critically observing and learning from what you see. There are so many opportunities for creativity. The conventional mindset of doing the same thing every year is a real hindrance to organic success. One good example of this Bill Liebhardt called relay cropping, an approach that may work some years in many places. He suggested drilling soybeans into a small grain in late spring. The small grain will be harvested in mid-summer, giving the soybean plants enough time to grow through the straw and produce a reasonable yield by October. Two harvests in one year, terrific weed control, and lots of organic biomass for the soil too! The soybean plants may not yield well in a dry year, but in 'normal' years, the payoff could be substantial. What a neat idea! It won't work for everyone all the time, but its worth a try!

6. Believe in what you are doing. We must believe that the organic system will work, we cannot begin by expecting it to fail. When Bill Leibhart presented recent scientific data showing serious environmental and health problems caused by the pervasive exposure to pesticides, we all sat up a little straighter and felt a little prouder. We farm organically for many reasons - greater farm economic security, the health of our families and ourselves, the rewards of community and cooperation, environmental concerns, and because this system works well for us. But we also have another role to play. This world can not survive continued assault with dangerous chemicals and poor agricultural practices much longer. Already we are seeing emasculated frogs, rising cancer rates, and sharply reduced human sperm counts in rural areas of Iowa, all linked to pesticide exposure. Antibiotics are losing their effectiveness because they have been so irresponsibly used as animal growth promoters. This is another legacy of the past 50 years of agricultural policy. We must actively show that there is another way that is productive, economical, environmentally friendly, healthy . . . and where weeds are consistently well controlled!

As we approach the holidays, the cards proclaiming ‘Peace on Earth and Good Will to All’ begin to arrive. For many of us, our personal philosophy toward peace has been deeply pondered during the past few months. However, the oft-repeated phrase in our house, “World Peace begins with your sister! (or brother)” is equally relevant to consider. Sometimes it is much harder to be peaceable with those closest to you. The founders of NYCO could have protected their markets and refused to share their hard-earned experience with others, but they did not. Instead, they learned that the more you give away, the more you have. As our community grew, so did our market opportunities and our strength as a group. Cooperation, sharing kindness, and friendship were not just nice, pleasant but somewhat impractical virtues, they were pragmatic, profitable, and deeply satisfying.

With the coming of the NOP, we have the opportunity to transcend regional, commodity and certifier loyalties, and really see ourselves as part of a larger cohesive, unified, and positive ORGANIC COMMUNITY. Just as families help and support each other, forgiving others’ quirks and inadequacies and sticking together even when we don’t agree, we in the organic community need to do this also.

We have a big job to do, and we can not do it alone!