

Barnyard Organics outlines keys to award winning success

*The need for innovation
and diversification*



Canada 

A fourth generation farmer, Mark Bernard has always been a firm believer in the need to innovate.

In fact, if you had to choose just two words to describe the North Freetown farm he operates with his wife Sally and their four children, they would have to be innovation and diversification. Barnyard Organics is reminiscent of the mixed farms that once dotted the province. They grow, mix and sell organic feed ratios, sell bulk organic grains, do custom seed cleaning and soybean roasting, manage a Community Shared Agriculture program for organic chicken and eggs and offer custom poultry processing.



Sally is manager of the livestock portion of the operation and keeps farm books. During the growing season, she also takes over a lot of running the feed mill to allow Mark to devote more time to the crops.

But the farm has also made a name for itself with award-winning environmental practices and by establishing itself as the only organic grainery east of Montreal.

Mark credits the federally and provincially funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership with helping the farm achieve its goals on both fronts.

Since beginning the transition of the farm to organics back in 2003, his business plan always included the purchase of a no-till drill, viewing it as a key component to enhancing soil health. While tilling the soil with a plow or disc does help break up soil compaction, eliminate weeds, and incorporate cover crops, it can also make a field more vulnerable to erosion.

Mark concedes his opinion is not universally shared within the organic industry since the drill is designed to be used in tandem with a herbicide in conventional agriculture to kill cover crops before the next planting.

“Obviously that is not in our plans and we have had to adapt, but so far it has worked pretty well,” Mark said.

He purchased a refurbished drill in Ontario with help from the Organic Industry Development Program of the Department of Agriculture and Land and it arrived just in time for spring planting. While it will take a full growing season to fully assess the benefits, Mark likes what he sees so far.

“We can put more seeds in the ground and the land is never in a fallow state,” he explained.

It also allows the farm to plant the later in the fall, explaining that having the land in a cover crop helps choke out weeds.

In addition to being better for the soil, Mark said the no-till method is also less labour and fuel intensive. The farm follows a five-year crop rotation (clover which is plowed to plant wheat, followed by soybeans and then

barley inter-seeded with field peas and then oats are planted as a nurse crop for the clover to establish and grow the following year) and he is hoping the non-till technique will help him extend that time frame to eight years for many of his fields.

“There is always a great deal of experimentation and no two growing seasons are the same,” he said.

While some of his crop goes to supply their feed mill, Mark said they also purchase organic grain from other growers in PEI and across the country. Since establishing East Coast Organic Grainery in 2018 with financial help from the federally and provincially funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership, annual production has increased from 240 to 700 tonnes per year.

The company ships to 17 retailers throughout the Maritimes. Unlike many businesses, Mark said demand for organic grain increased during COVID-19, which took him a little by surprise.

“As far as I can tell, it seems to be more people at home who have decided to raise backyard flocks of chickens,” Mark explained. “It will be interesting to see if that continues as the pandemic starts to subside.”

He is hoping the grainery will continue to grow and diversify, noting he has been talking to a farmer in Nova Scotia about the possibility of growing organic corn on a commercial basis, something that is not happening anywhere in the region right now.

The farm is enrolled in the Alternative Land Use System (ALUS) and they have an extensive network of soil conservation structures including grass waterways, diversion terraces and farmable berm terraces. All of their buffer zones on the farm are wider than the mandatory 15-metres to ensure there is no tillage creep into the zone. They also implement an eight metre buffer between their farm and adjacent ones.

Barnyard Organics has been recognized for its soil conservation and sustainable agriculture efforts, including being the first certified organic farm to win the soil conservationist of the year award in the cash crop category from the PEI Soil and Crop Improvement Association back in 2018. They were also the 2012 winners of the Atlantic Canada Outstanding Young Farmer Award.

Earlier this year, they were named winners of the Gilbert R. Clements Award for Excellence in Environmental Farm Planning. This award, named after the late Environment Minister, is given annually to a farm that is economically viable, environmentally sound and socially responsible in the production and/or marketing of high quality food from a sustainable system.