

An organic approach to supply-chain marketing

*The power of food,
to bring people together*



Canada

The power of food to bring people together

Soleil Hutchinson is a firm believer in the power of food to bring people together.

Banking on growing consumer interest in locally sourced organic food and the power of farmers working together, the South Melville organic farmer has created a supply and distribution chain to supply Island restaurants.

Soleil works collaboratively with five other farms to supply restaurants with a full range of local organic produce.



Hutchinson, who simply named her farm Soleil's Farm, was named the 2021 winner of the PEI Women's Institute Woman in Agriculture Award for her marketing and community building efforts.

"The demand for fresh organic vegetables far exceeds the supply, and that demand continues to grow and we are in a good location in the province," she says. "I love connecting with the people who have chosen to support our farmers collective."

Hutchinson credits the Organic Industry Development Program, funded by the federal and provincial governments under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, for her broader marketing efforts.

"It's allowed me to purchase technology that has helped me to develop my organic markets," she says.

That technology includes a stainless-steel bubbler and industrial salad spinner that gently cleans greens in bulk. Greens are placed in the 10-foot by four-foot-tub with bubbling cold water and then dried in the spinner, ready for packaging.

"It cleans the greens while cutting down on the amount of handling so there is less risk of bruising," says Hutchinson.

The program has also helped her improve package labeling.

In the field, Hutchinson says the Organic Industry Development Program helped her implement no-till strategies and to install an irrigation system to ensure her crop remains healthy during dry periods.

She is currently in the process of using the marketing side of the program to gain more access to grocery stores. She is using part of the funds to upgrade her vegetable packing facility so that she can become certified under the CanadaGAP program, a food safety program which is a precondition for selling in large supermarkets.

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Hutchinson, who has two full-time employees and three seasonal workers, says upgrading her processing capacity has streamlined the operation and made it more efficient.

She admits she initially wasn't planning on a career in agriculture.

After completing a degree in environmental studies in the early 2000s, Hutchinson decided to travel, ending up in Portland, Oregon. She really liked the area and decided on an extended stay. To pay the bills, she took a job on an organic farm.

"I always considered homesteading, but I never thought I would full-out farm," she says. "But once I started, that was it. I've been doing it ever since."



She moved back home to be closer to her family, and Soleil's Farm was born. It actually began in 2009 with a small farm in Oyster Bed Bridge before moving to the Appin Road the following year.

Hutchinson moved to her current location in South Melville in 2015 and worked on getting an organic certification for the farm. Since the land had not been in production for more than seven years prior to her buying it, "I only needed a one-year transition and I just put in a cover crop."

A firm believer in plant diversity, she is growing a variety of vegetables, with the main cash crops being lettuce, carrots, beets, tomatoes, squash, garlic, and Brussels sprouts.

Some of Hutchinson's organic supply chain partners are also involved in a weekly community-supported agriculture basket. The winter food basket was established in 2015 to give customers access to local organic food at times of the year when it can be more difficult to find.

It was expanded to the summer months in 2018, offering kombucha, sourdough bread, and pastured meats in addition to fresh produce.

As for the future, Hutchinson's top priority is to increase production on her seven-acre farm with improved production techniques and environmental practices like cover crops, which are grown on almost half her farm.