

Organic spuds ain't no small potatoes

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Nearly all organic producers agree that eliminating their exposure to chemicals gives them more peace of mind. Workers at Fraserland Organic (l to r) Ron Harris, Brent Harris, Jeff Harris and Dave Duchek. Photo: Fraserland Organic Farms

University of Manitoba – At least one organic farmer has figured out how to grow potatoes without the usual weekly dose of chemicals.

It's a myth that potatoes demand synthetic protection, according to Brent Harris of Fraserland Organic Farms in Delta B.C. He said you can grow a healthy potato crop once your land has been in an organic system long enough.

” Rotation plays an important role. We'd have problems if we grew potatoes on potatoes or potatoes every second year. – Brent Harris, Fraserland Organic Farms

He adds that they normally keep a four-year buffer between potato crops. With the wide variety of organic crops grown at Fraserland, a four-year buffer isn't hard to maintain.

"We don't irrigate unless we absolutely need to. When a potato crop gets too moist, that's when you get your fungus problems. The crop is healthier if we error on the side of too little water rather than too much.

"Some of the land has tile drainage, and that helps. We'd prefer to have tile drainage on every field, but it's expensive.

"There are some bio-pesticides and natural products we have in our toolbox, but they're very limited. Rotation and managing moisture are the 2 main management tools."

Harris said they are picky about which varieties they grow, to the extent that they conduct their own on-farm trials, using varieties bred with disease-resistant traits. They grow red, white, yellow flesh, purple, russet and baby nugget potatoes. He concedes that the hardier disease-resistant varieties don't yield as high, but that's the trade-off an organic farmer has to live with.

"Weeds aren't a big issue in organic potatoes. You can go in there and cultivate them."

Harris said biodiversity goes hand-in-hand with organic crop production. It happens over time whether you try to make it happen or not. Beneficial insects are the most significant, as he explains on the Fraserland website.

"Years of organic production have helped us to build an ecosystem friendly to ladybugs and bees and other beneficial insects. A strong ladybug population can mean the difference between a successful field of peas and a disaster crop destroyed by aphids."

Because consumers demand high quality products, the farm culls approximately 25 percent of their potatoes before bagging for the market. Their high standards remove potatoes which don't meet Canada No 1 grade standards.

Spuds with minor skin defects, unique shapes or odd sizes may be ugly, but they're still plenty good to eat and they're as certified organically grown Canada No 2.

Enter the Pugly Potato. These No 2. Spuds make a bold statement that Ugly is only skin deep. Plus, they are sold at an attractive price compared to No 1. Harris said his Pugly Potatoes are here to help change the way we think about produce.