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The old and new of organic agriculture



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THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

(Jan 29, 2009)

Wolfgang Pfenning is a regular fixture at the annual Guelph Organic Conference. He is equally comfortable at the trade fair as he is on the family farm in Baden, west of Kitchener. His affable nature reflects a balance he infuses into all aspects of Pfenning's organics, from the crops and soil to professional relationships that are an inherent part of the business. Organic farming, for Pfenning, balances old farming methods with new technology. Even the way he has learned -- from watching his father in the fields, to classes on soil science and geology -- is a combination of the two. "I was involved in a presentation online about two weeks ago. The title of it was Organic Farming by Tradition and Science," he says, illustrating his point. "There were many things I would observe that I didn't understand. I thought when my father plowed, and the soil crumbled behind him, that he was a bad farmer." Now science has shown that the right balance of magnesium and calcium loosens the soil, making nutrients more available to plants. "My dad's soil was in much better shape than the neighbours". He was farming out of tradition, but now science can back up what we know, and we can take tradition up a notch. "He never did leave the farm that his family settled when they came from Germany in 1981. He had compensated by doing a lot of travelling. "For almost 20 years, I have spent at least one full day a week in Toronto," says Pfenning. He used to drive the farm truck into the city, but now he spends that time building relationships; visiting buyers and small retailers, and observing city life to understand the people for whom he is growing. He is convinced that organic methods are the best approach for Pfenning's Organic Farm, but insists he is not out to convert anyone. In Germany, he says, the family was judged and ridiculed for their approach to farming, so it was

refreshing to move to Canada. "Here people respect what you are and what you do. It made a positive impact on me, and I can have this dialogue with farmers who see things differently than we do."Pfenning grows 81 hectares of vegetables each year, hiring more than 70 employees, some of whom stay on year-round. "To me organic is also social and cultural -- more like the old days, too, when farm life was more integrated."The backdrop for his booth at the conference (of which Pfenning's is a major sponsor) is a gallery of photos and stories from the farm -- local friends and family who have devoted themselves to the business, and staff who return from Jamaica each year, with stories of the investments they have made in their communities back home. He has developed a model for distribution that builds on the farm's social, cultural and growing network. He buys from, and sells to a network of small growers, who, in turn sell at farmers' markets, on-farm stores, and through their weekly box programs. In poetic fashion, Pfenning sums up his approach to business. "I have to be open to philosophy. I have to think, what path do I want to walk? Some people leave a lot of tracks in the form of unhappy relationships, in pursuit of money. Relationships only work if both sides are happy."Pfenning's organic vegetables are available at many retailers that carry organic produce, and through other organic farms with whom they network. Pfenning's Organic Farms are at 1209 Waterloo Street in Baden. Visit their website at:

<http://www.pfenningsfarms.ca>