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2016

From convention to innovation

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THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF



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MAGAZINE

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SELECTING WHEAT VARIETIES FOR ORGANIC PRODUCTION 13

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Organic Agronomy Producer Meetings :

- January 14** Converting seasonal cover crops into multi-year alfalfa forage
- February 11** Pollination biology in organic agriculture
- March 11** TBA

Other Winter Farm Clubs: North and South – Stay tuned for announcements

March 26 & 27: Advancing Organics Conference & Trade Show, Regina

SaskOrganics is always in the process of planning events. For the most up-to-date event list, stay tuned to our digital newsletter or visit our website events. <http://saskorganics.org/events/>

If you are not receiving our digital newsletter and would like to, please email admin@saskorganic.com and we will add you to the list.

Happy New Year!

Wishing you a healthy, happy, and prosperous New Year.
May 2026 bring new opportunities and continued success.



Fall and winter for SaskOrganics have been eventful, as always. Our education program continues to be one of our core activities; from online events to farm club meetings, tabling at consumer events, to planning and preparations for *Advancing Organics Conference & Trade Show* on March 26 & 27 in Regina. Busy months are

nothing new for us at SaskOrganics, and the last few have been no exception.

Speaking of our conference, since the dissolution of Organic Connections in 2025, *Advancing Organics Conference and Trade Show* is now the only organic conference in Saskatchewan. It was the hope of the Organic Connections board that in their absence, the other organic conferences in the prairies including ours would see an increase in support and attendance. This is our desire as well, and we hope you'll consider joining us in March!

We have put together a great issue of *Abundance* to kick off the New Year. Our *Innovate* article features Stefan Graner, a forward-thinking organic farmer with a passion for sustainability and interest in cutting-edge technology. Last summer, SaskOrganics had the pleasure of co-hosting a field day at both Stefan's farm and the farm of our director, Colin MacDonald, during which participants saw Stefan's solar-powered robots in action. We caught up with Stefan for this article to share his story with our larger audience.

Nourish takes us to Route 26 Coffee House, in St. Walburg. We always love to hear about Saskatchewan establishments that source local and organic ingredients for some of their menu items. Owner Peggy Cowan bought organic and local when practical for her own household, and wanted to continue that effort when she opened her coffee shop. Twelve years on, Route 26 Coffee House has become a regional treasure, known for its delicious food and warm hospitality.

We invited Dr. Hiroshi Kubota, from the AAFC Lacombe Research and Development Centre, to be the author of our *Sustain* article for this issue. Dr. Kubota has been and is currently involved in organic research on the prairies. He is a lead researcher on an Organic Science Cluster 4 project underway, but for this article, we asked him to speak to some of the prior research he and colleagues conducted that compared wheat variety performance in conventional and organic systems.

I've had suggestions over the years from members for kids' content in *Abundance*. So in this issue, instead of the usual *Feature* article, there are some organic agriculture themed activities for the little ones in your life. Whether you have young kids or grandkids, you can pass along the issue to a child you know - but you might want to read it first, in case they get the markers out!

And last but not least, in the Bits and Bites section, we remind you about the recently published Organic Action Plan, and feature our 2025 photo contest winner. Congratulations to Jessa-Lynne Robb for her beautiful photo of purple barley growing in Aberdeen, Sask.

If you enjoy reading this magazine, please thank the advertisers you see in it whose support continues to make this publication possible. Be sure to check out their ads in this and every issue. Although this magazine is free to certified organic producers in Saskatchewan, we welcome paid subscription support to help cover the publication and mailing costs. ●

All the best in 2026,

Deb Tuchelt

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A Cuppa Local

Route 26 Coffee House blends community with conscious choices

By Brook Thalgott

When Peggy Cowan first stepped into a modest St. Walburg home her husband Bert once bought to house his seismic crew, she wasn't planning on opening a café. After Bert retired and they spent a couple of years renting it out, Peggy finally saw the inside of the little house—and had an idea. "I said, 'I think this little house would make a great coffee shop.' I often joke that I should've laid down until the feeling went away," she says.

Now in its ninth year, Route 26 Coffee House has become a destination on the prairie, drawing visitors for its warm atmosphere and even warmer hospitality.



Photos provided by Peggy Cowan



SOURCING WITH INTENTION

From the start, Cowan was keen to bring sustainable choices into the kitchen. "Any time I can use organic fruits and vegetables, I do," she says, listing items like spinach, carrots, garlic, and ginger among her regulars. Organic teas and milk alternatives are also mainstays, along with organic pizza sauce, homemade organic dressings and broths, and organic coffee syrups when they're available. Even the baking, made with unbleached flour, reflects Cowan's commitment to quality. With few suppliers nearby, she relies on word-of-mouth to find local eggs, produce and even handmade crafts. "Usually someone will come in and ask how they can sell their products here," she says.

FINDING A FIT

In a town with few café options, Cowan was simply looking for a niche that wasn't already filled. People came to try something a little different—and kept coming back. "Customers enjoy the quality and taste, and they return for that," she says. That growing appreciation for organic and local food mirrors a broader shift she's seen in customer habits.

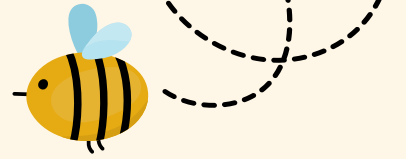
Still, the café's secret sauce isn't just its sourcing. It's Cowan's own recipes, made with care and guarded with humour. "They're all under the 'I could tell you but then I'd have to kill you' category," she jokes.

One thing she's always willing to share, though, is her love for the land and the people around it. With every cup poured and pastry served, Route 26 continues to offer more than just food—it offers connection. ●

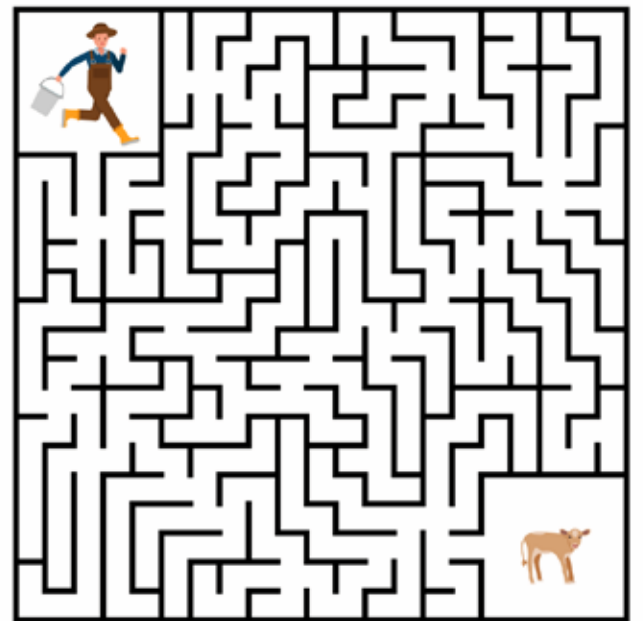
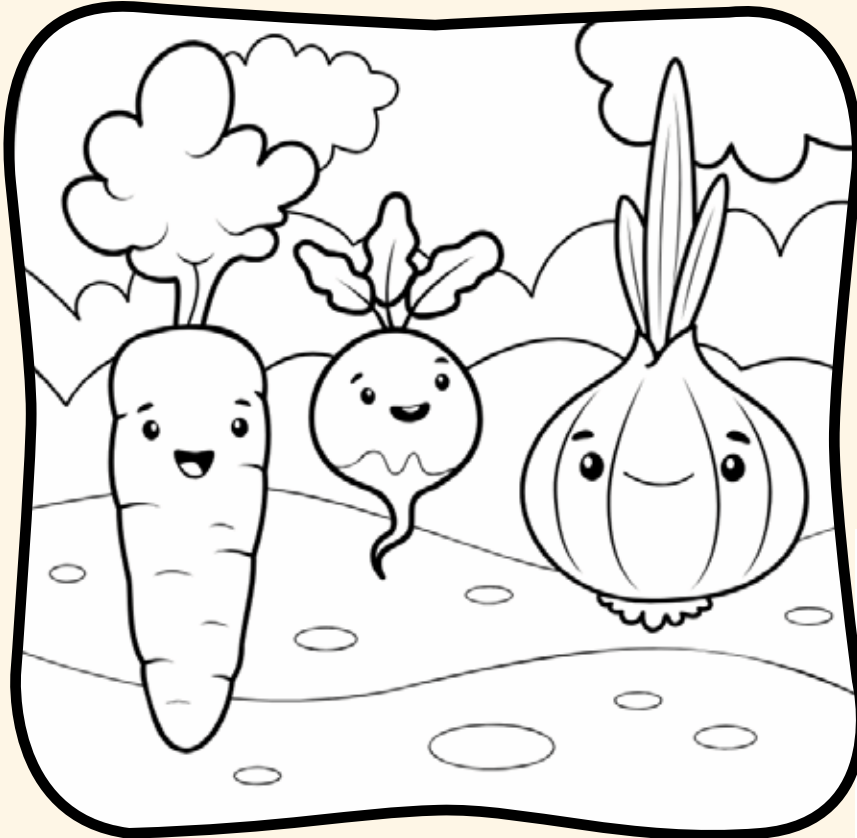
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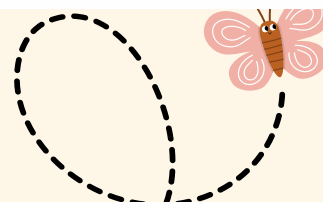


Over the years we have had requests for kid's content in *Abundance*. In this special feature, we've created some organic agriculture themed activities for the little ones in your life.



Fun Fact
There are more than 20,000 species of bees.

Maze Help the organic farmer find his lost calf!



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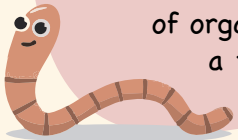


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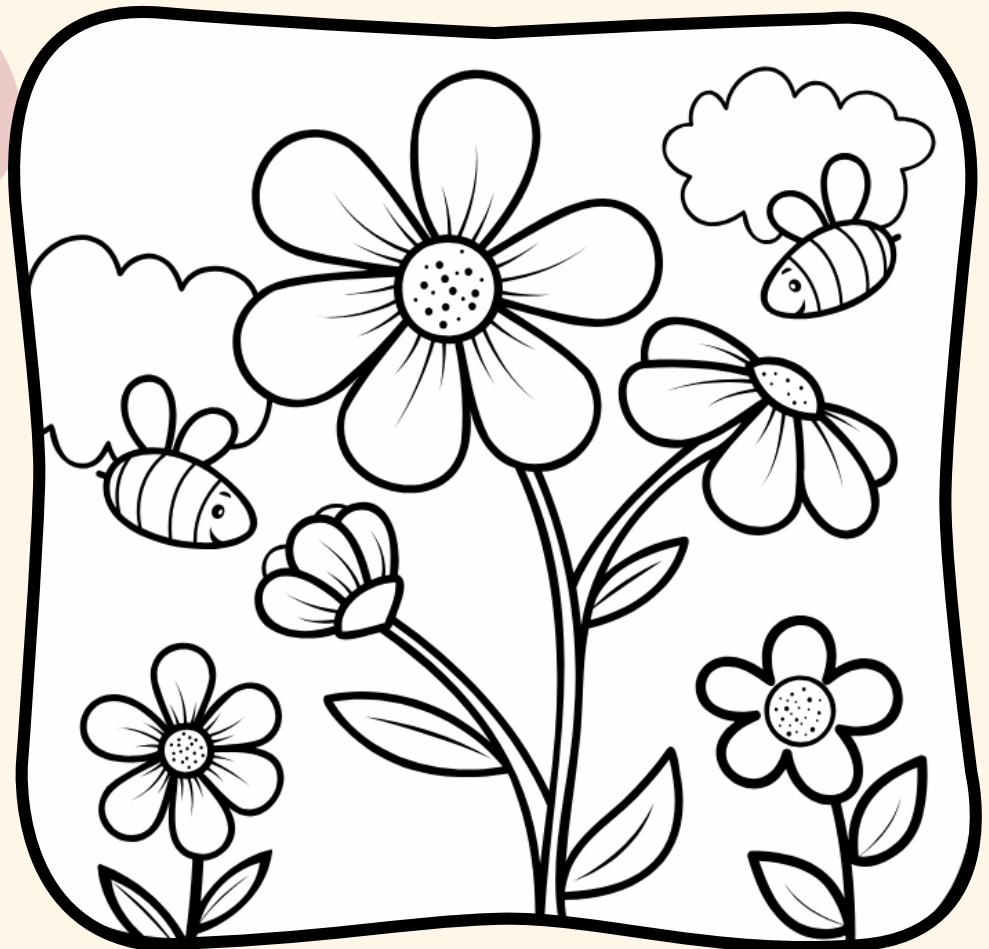
There are approximately **99 million hectares** of organic land around the globe.

Fun Fact

Healthy soil has a large diversity of life, with estimates suggesting **10,000 to 50,000** different types of organisms in just a teaspoon.



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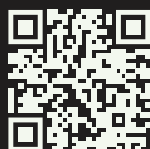
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Stefan & Robot - Lake Country Organic Field Day. Photo by Deb Tuchelt

From convention to innovation

How one farmer's evolution from conventional agriculture to a solar-powered, robotic organic operation reflects a broader shift in sustainable thinking.

By Brook Thalgott

When Dr. Stefan Graner and his wife Ulrike emigrated from Germany to Canada, they didn't envision a future in farming. Both born and raised in the city, they first settled in Calgary, then Courtenay, B.C., before eventually making their way to Saskatchewan. What started as a whim—buying farmland—has evolved into a cutting-edge organic operation rooted in sustainability and a strong personal ethos.

Graner's early years were far from the field. He trained in fine furniture making and earned a business administration certificate in Canada. He then pursued a diploma in agriculture at the University of Saskatchewan, and his education didn't stop there! Eventually, he went back to school to obtain a degree in dentistry, and established his own dental practice. All the while continuing to farm and raise a family with his wife. "One of my uncles in Germany opened an organic food store over 40 years ago," he recalls. "That, and our garden-based lifestyle, influenced how I wanted to farm." The Graners spent nearly 20 years farming conventionally before switching to organic in 2018.



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Solar Robot at night. Photo by Stefan Graner.

THE TURNING POINT

The catalyst for change came in 2017 when a long-time business arrangement with a neighbouring farmer ended. With a smaller acreage in hand, Graner saw the opportunity to pivot. "It allowed me to switch to smaller, more specialized equipment, suitable for organic farming," he says. "I'd eaten organic food for most of my life. The hypocrisy of consuming it but not producing it finally pushed me to make the transition."

AN ECOLOGICAL WAY TO FARM

Graner believes organic farming is simply "less intrusive" to the environment. "It's not perfect. There's still diesel and tillage, but it's a step toward sustainability," he says. He envisions a future where farming goes beyond organic, to a system with zero emissions and minimal impact. "We're not there yet, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try."

On his farm, organic practices extend beyond chemical avoidance. His cropping system has shifted dramatically from a two-year wheat/canola rotation to one that includes at least five different crops per year, with occasional intercropping. Recently, he introduced a two-year rest period using unharvested alfalfa to build soil structure and fertility.

FARMING WITH THE SUN

A forward thinker, Graner is also an early adopter of technology. His solar-powered robots, a fleet of four, handle seeding and weeding tasks with remarkable precision. "They use real-time kinematics GPS to place each seed, then weed precisely around it," he explains. "They don't use AI or image recognition, just math. It's simple, robust and runs 24/7 on solar power."

The robots are a game-changer for his organic system, offering weed control over 80 per cent of the field without fuel inputs. "Being able to do this without burning a drop of diesel during the growing season—it's deeply rewarding."

ON THE HORIZON

Graner isn't stopping there. He envisions selling off his tractor and going fully net-zero in the field. "That's the holy grail for me," he says. "A fully autonomous, solar-powered farm. It may take years, but I think it's possible."

For now, his focus is on refining the robotic systems he already has. "It's about optimization," he says. "Getting the most out of what we've built, and pushing it further."

RETHINKING THE SYSTEM

To Graner, organic farming is a necessary, if transitional, step toward true sustainability. He likens it to the development of electric vehicles: promising, but not the endpoint. "We need systems that are regenerative, resilient and zero-emission," he says. "We're still learning how to get there."

His blend of old-school sustainability with long and diverse rotations, alfalfa cover, and nutrient cycling with new-school tech sets an example for what's possible when philosophy meets innovation. And it all began with a whim, a move across continents and a willingness to challenge the norm. ●

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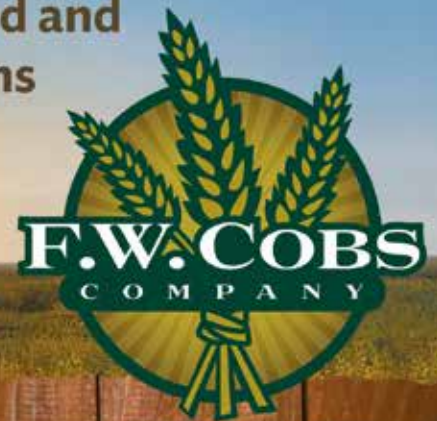
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Photos by Dr. Hiroshi Kubota. Wheat variety trials, Edmonton research station

Selecting wheat varieties for organic production

By Dr. Hiroshi Kubota, Research Scientist, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Lacombe Research & Development Centre

Wheat variety selection is not just about yield. It's a management tool that changes how a crop competes for nutrients against weeds and therefore affects your whole-farm workload and input choices. It is well known that varieties that express rapid early vigour, taller plants, greater biomass production, and strong root growth can not only capture soil nitrogen and light faster than weeds, but also compete with weeds, leading to reduced weed seed return, therefore lowering long-term weed pressure in organic crop production.

Organic cropping systems generally show lower average yields and lower yield stability than conventional systems, but the magnitude of the gap varies widely by crop, management, soil and local climate. Wheat

variety performance differs between organic and conventional systems because the two production methods impose different resource regimes and biotic stress levels. Trials consistently show lower average yields in organic systems (~25% gap), but the variety and management choices have a significant impact (Wilbois & Schmidt, 2019). Some varieties perform better under organic management, while others excel with mineral-N fertilization. The variety performance depends strongly on system context, meaning varieties bred for high-input, conventional environments (selected for maximum yield under abundant nutrient supply and low weed pressure) do not always perform best in organic systems. Crop potential yield is largely dependent on two key factors; nutrient-acquisition dynamics and weed-competitive ability. (Mason & Spaner, 2006; Rempelos et al., 2023)

NUTRIENT-ACQUISITION DYNAMICS

Organic systems rely on mineralization of organic N from soil organic matter and nutrient sources such as manure, compost, and green manures, and biological N fixation in rotations. Mineralization rate of organic N depends on environment conditions (temperature, soil moisture, aeration of soil), soil properties (soil pH, texture, soil organic matter %), and organic matter quality (C:N ratio), therefore available N is often lower early in the season. Rempelos et al. (2023) indicated that varieties that do well under organic management either:

1. require less early N because they partition more to spike number (tillering) or kernel per head
2. have root traits that access organic-N pools (deeper or more extensive roots)
3. show efficient N remobilization to grain

For organic crop production, selection of varieties with better nutrient-use efficiency is essential. Research has shown that some varieties are inherently more efficient at taking up and using N and other nutrients.



Wheat variety trials, Edmonton research station.

Choosing varieties with better nitrogen-use efficiency (NEU) or that perform well in low-N conditions can reduce the need for costly imported organic fertilizers/manure and improve yield stability under variable fertility. NUE defines how well crops capture and use the nitrogen released from soil organic matter, manure, or cover crops to produce yield. High NUE crops/varieties make better use of slow-release N, common in organic systems, reduce the need for external inputs, improve yields in low-N soils, and limit nitrogen losses. Selecting vigorous growing, deep-rooted varieties and using diverse rotations can often boost NUE. Nitrogen released from soil depends on several factors, including temperature, moisture, and the characteristics of soil organic matter. Crop N demand sometimes mismatches soil N supply, which can constrain crop yield even with crops that have good NUE.

WEED-COMPETITIVE ABILITY

Organic production depends more on crop competitiveness (early vigour, canopy closure, greater height, tillering, allelopathy) than conventional production. Varieties bred for high-input shorter architecture might be less competitive under organic conditions. Breeding and trial data show measurable differences among cultivars in weed competitiveness. Different wheat morphologies naturally vary in their ability to compete with weeds under Prairie growing conditions (Mason & Spaner, 2006; Mason et al, 2008). These studies found that wheat varieties differ significantly in how well they maintain yield when weeds are present and how much they suppress weed growth. These differences became most obvious in high-weed environments (Mason et al., 2008). One participatory organic wheat breeding case study in Manitoba compared two parents (i.e. an older, tall "heritage-type" wheat variety and a modern wheat variety) and progeny selected by two experienced organic farmers about 1,800 km apart from each other (Carkner et al, 2025). The results show how certain traits—especially height, seed size, lodging resistance, and nutrient efficiency—can benefit organic systems. From these studies, four traits consistently supported better performance:

1. Taller plants that rise above weeds and capture more sunlight. However, tall wheat can bring a lodging risk. Organic fields often experience uneven fertility from manure, green manures, or low-P soils. Taller wheat has a higher risk for lodging in areas of high manure input.
2. Larger seed produces stronger seedlings. Strong seedlings emerge faster, helping suppress weeds. Early vigor is critical where herbicides aren't used.
3. Earlier heading and maturity allow the crop to get ahead of weeds and reduce competition for moisture and nutrients.
4. Higher spike numbers (tillering) help create denser canopies that shade weeds.



Wheat variety trials, Edmonton research station.

Rank	Cultivar	Yield (t ha ⁻¹)		
		Conv ^a	Org ^b	Diff ^c
1	Marquis	3.88	4.29	-0.41
2	Infinity	4.91	4.76	0.14
3	Park	4.33	4.05	0.29
4	Unity	4.94	4.62	0.32
5	Harvest	4.88	4.55	0.34
6	Minnedosa	5.41	4.88	0.53
27	5700PR	5.90	4.12	1.77
28	Andrew	6.88	5.03	1.85
29	Sadash	6.85	4.94	1.91
30	Osler	5.14	3.13	2.01
31	Lillian	5.39	3.34	2.05
32	5701PR	5.71	3.64	2.07
-	LSD _(0.05)	0.11	0.17	-

^a Conventional

^b Organic

^c Difference

Fig. 1 Relative ranking of the cultivars based on the differences between the conventional and organic management systems for grain yield (t ha⁻¹) for all the cultivars grown at Edmonton Research station during 2010 to 2012 (modified Kamran et al., 2014)

When weed pressure is low, and depending on weed species, these competitive traits become less important or effective, and yield differences between wheat varieties are much smaller. Thus, desirable organic ideotype (i.e. ideal structural plant types with specific morphological and physiological traits for the optimum performance) depends on locations (e.g., High weed pressure environments – early vigour, rapid canopy closure, tall plant height, high tiller number; low fertility systems – high NUE and deep and dense root structure; low-available phosphorus soil condition – extensive and fine root systems, mycorrhizal responsiveness; water-limited areas – deeper root systems and good water use efficiency)(Carkner et. Al., 2023, Kaur et. Al., 2021, Rempelos et. Al., 2023).

YIELD

Figure 1 shows an example of varietal performance under two cropping systems in Alberta. This study reflects a 3-year average (2007–2009) comparing spring wheat yield grown under organic and conventional systems. Experiments were conducted on Orthic Black Chernozem soils typical of the Edmonton region. The organic rotation included forage legumes and cereals, while the conventional rotation used cereal–oilseed sequences. The organic field has been organically managed since 1999 and compost (consisting of dairy manure, sawdust, wood chips and straw) was applied in the experimental field for 5 consecutive years starting in 1999 at the rate of 50 to 62 t ha⁻¹. No compost or livestock manure was applied in the field after 2005, relying instead on nitrogen supplied by prior legume forage in rotation with a sequence of wheat, fall rye, a mixture of triticale and field pea. Conventional plots received recommended N and P fertilizers and standard pesticide applications.

CONCLUSION

Wheat variety selection in organic systems is a relatively low-risk, high-reward management tool, not just for a yield decision. It shapes how the crop acquires nitrogen and competes with weeds, influencing inputs and management practices. Traits like early vigour, taller stature, good ground cover, strong rooting, large seed, earlier maturity, and high tillering seem to improve weed suppression and nitrogen use. However, some drawbacks like taller stature can pose an increased lodging risk under certain situations (e.g., uneven fertility, high manure input). Because nutrient levels and weed pressure in organic systems vary, no single "best" ideotype exists; the most suitable variety depends on locally tested/ adopted genotype for your environment, fertility regime, weed flora, and overall farm management strategy. ●

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Bits & Bites

By Deb Tuchelt, Executive Director, SaskOrganics

ORGANIC ACTION PLAN

In the fall issue of *Abundance*, we let you know about two national reports: The Organic Task Force (OTF) Report, published in September, and the Organic Action plan (OAP), which at the time was still in its final public comment period. The OTF report strongly informed a chapter of the OAP, which was published in November for organic parliament day in Ottawa.

The plan calls for collaboration among government, industry, and civil society to unlock the full potential of organic food and farming in advancing Canada's economic, environmental, and social goals.

The Canadian organic market now exceeds \$9.75 billion annually, yet Canada remains without a national strategy to meet this opportunity. The OAP provides a clear path for coordinated investment and policy action. Organic food and farming deliver proven economic, environmental, and social benefits.

The plan is intended to be updated and maintained to stay current, relevant, and accurate over time.

Read the Organic Action Plan on the Canada Organic Trade Association (COTA) or Canadian Organic Growers (COG) websites. ●

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Jessa-Lynne Robb, *Amethyst Harvest*,
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