

COMMENT

All these years I've been a worm murderer!

Last week I donned my farmer hat and attended the Halton Agriculture Forum held at the Gambrel Barn in Country Heritage Park, Milton.

This event is organized by Halton Region, and this year marks the fifth-annual forum. The theme was The Dirt on Soil Health, in other words, tips for farmers to get the best yields from their soil, yet still be a good steward to the land.

Now I'm not a big farmer. I grow some hay and a bit of barley, and have a rotation of crops consisting of corn, wheat and soybeans on the farm.

So I'm a little farmer.

But the only thing that separates me from the big farmers is acreage.

The science behind cropping is exactly the same, whether we're talking about a 100-acre family farm, a two-acre hobby farm, or a 10,000-acre cash crop operation — we plant stuff, it grows.

Now as long as I can recall, there has been an age-old debate about the pros and cons of tillage practices, namely conventional tillage, vs. no-till or minimum-tillage.

From the day I drew my first breath, I was raised to use conventional tillage, where we pulled into the field with a plow (usually in the fall), turned the soil over and then the following spring, worked that land until it was like a garden plot, then seeded it.

That was how I was raised, following in the footsteps of my forefathers.

It made sense to me to turn the stubble on top under the ground and expose the fresh earth to the light of day.

It also looked prettier when it was plowed like that.

No-till or limited-till is quite the opposite, and the proponents claim they have better crops and save fuel. It's just not as pretty.

But after listening to speakers Thursday night, I'm re-thinking my cropping strategy.

The first speaker, Adam Hayes of the Ontario

Ministry of Agriculture and Food and Ministry of Rural Affairs, started the night talking about earthworms.

Yup, plain old simple worms — you know, the ones we use to go fishing.

Adam had photos of the burrow holes worms make in the fall, digging down into the soil to spend the winter.

He explained how those burrows are a conduit for the soil nutrients on the surface to make their way to the depths of the soil, where they do their best work.

He also said the soil needs a layer of mulch on top to prevent erosion, and also contain the moisture, and some fine roots throughout it, to keep it loose.

Another speaker, Tyler Vollmershausen of Vollmershausen Farms Ltd., in Oxford County, described the innovative ways limited-tillage is used on the family farms.

He recounted how he approached the guest speaker at a farm forum to ask how he might improve the crop yields on their farm.

First thing she asked him was if he plowed their fields in the fall, and if so, why.

I guess to get it done in the fall so we didn't have to plow it in the spring before planting, Tyler replied.

So you go out in the fall, plow the fields, and kill two-thirds of the earthworms that are a benefit to the soil, she said, Then you return in the spring, work it again, and kill the remaining one-third of the worms?

When Tyler said those words I had an epiphany — all these years I've been a worm mass murderer.

This spring the fields at Brown Farm will still be planted in conventional practice, as the work was started last fall and I have to follow through.

But come the fall, I might well take a different approach.

And in doing so, save the fate of a few million worms out there.



TED BROWN



Then & Now

Georgetown High School, erected in 1889 by Edward Lennox, architect. It was demolished in 1959. Date of original photo is 1950.

Then photo - Esquesing Historical Society/Now photo - Amy Douglas (Heritage Halton Hills)



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