

# Science Matters

— by David Suzuki



## Organic farming a growing field

It wasn't long ago that organic farming in North America was considered small potatoes — something practised in rural areas by hippies and others looking to "get back to nature." Today, it is a large and growing industry, and you can find at least some organic food in virtually any supermarket. But is it best for our health and the environment?

In theory, organic methods of food production sound ideal. Strict rules prohibit the use of synthetic pesticides and herbicides, for example, which are also toxic to beneficial insects and plants, and often toxic to humans. Organic farms also eschew the use of synthetic fertilizers, because these nutrients can leach into rivers and lakes, boosting plant algae growth, which can choke out other aquatic life.

The overall goal of organic farming is to use agricultural methods that have the smallest impact on the environment and offer the greatest benefits for people. That's vital, because feeding a growing human population will put increasing pressure on the natural world and society in the coming decades. In fact, a group of ecologists writing in a recent edition of the journal *Science* argue that, if we continue with current agricultural practices, the resulting damage "may rival climate change in environmental and social impacts."

But some critics say that organic farming actually increases pressure on the environment. In a recent opinion article in the journal *Nature*, titled "Urban myths of organic farming" a UK biologist wrote that organic agriculture is an ideology which results in "lower yields and inefficient use of land." The author further claims that: "Although its supporters assert that organic agriculture is superior to other farming methods, the lack of scientific studies means that this claim cannot be substantiated."

That's a good point. Widespread use of organic agriculture in developed nations is a relatively new phenomenon, and until recently it did not receive the sort of research funding that conventional agriculture does. This lack of scientific evidence has created a bit of a backlash against organic agriculture. Last year, an American television reporter even fabricated test results on organic produce and accused organic producers at a trade show, insisting that their products were dangerous. He was later reprimanded by the network and apologized, but these problems show the need for better scientific evidence.

A study published last week in *Nature* may help answer some of the critics' concerns. The six-year study, conducted at the University of Washington, found that Golden Delicious apples grown organically in an experimental plot ranked first in

terms of environmental sustainability, profitability and energy efficiency, over apples grown either conventionally or using a mixed method. In a taste test, untrained observers also rated the organic apples to be the sweetest of the bunch.

This study is especially important to developing sustainable agriculture because it considers many different variables that all have an effect on natural resources, including energy use, impact on biodiversity and soil quality. As the study author told *New Scientist*, until this report, "there've been almost no studies looking at the overall sustainability of both (organic and conventional) methods." And the organic

apple plots fared very well. For example, the soil held water better and resisted degradation, and the plots required less labour and less water per apple produced, and provided similar yields.

Of course, one study does not tell the whole tale, but it is an important step towards developing an agricultural system that is truly sustainable in the long term. Over time, we may find that no one system is ideally suited for all conditions. But the future of food production on an increasingly crowded and stressed planet must be based in sound science, not any particular ideology.

To discuss this topic with others, visit the discussion forum at [www.davidsuzuki.org](http://www.davidsuzuki.org).



**WHO LET THE DOGS OUT:** These three adorable cross-breed pups were found near the tracks on Third Line, Acton. If you have any information regarding their owners, please contact Acton Veterinary Clinic, 853-1450.

## Legion bowlers rack up top ten

Two Acton Legion Ladies Auxiliary bowling teams racked up top 10 finishes at their provincial championship in Peterborough on the weekend.

The team of Teresa Uiterwyk, Marg Dunn, Bev Boisvenue, Celine Clarke, Cindy Clarke and Marg McCoy finished 7th of the 30 teams entered in the annual

event. The team of Kit Allen, Peggy Harris, Delia Kentner, Annamarie Lowin, Lucy Synnott and Gail Gibson finished 9th.

# HALTON REGION

## GO AHEAD TAKE A SIP

YOUR WATER IS TOP QUALITY

- Quarterly Water Quality Report - January 1st to March 31st, will be available April 30th, 2001 -

Halton Region is committed to providing our residents with high quality drinking water right from the tap.

- ✓ Halton's drinking water has consistently tested safe
- ✓ Halton has performed better than the required Ontario Drinking Water Standards
- ✓ Halton's staff are highly qualified, licensed and are dedicated to delivering safe drinking water

Through the Operation Clean Water Program, the Province of Ontario implements and enforces Drinking Water Standards to protect public health. If you have been looking for specific information about your drinking water, Halton Region's Quarterly Water Quality Report will provide you with the information you need.

The report details information about where your water comes from, what it contains, and how it compares to the Provincial Standards. If your drinking water comes from a private well, you are responsible for your water's safety. Halton's website provides links to the Halton Region Health Department and the Ministry of the Environment regarding the maintenance and safety of your private well supply.

The Water Quality Report can be obtained free of charge by:

- Downloading it from the Internet at Halton's website, [www.region.halton.on.ca](http://www.region.halton.on.ca);
- Picking up a copy in person during normal business hours (Monday to Friday, 8:30 to 4:30) at the Regional Municipality of Halton (Planning & Public Works Department), Records & Information Management Section, 1151 Bronte Road, Oakville; or
- Ordering a copy by phone at (905) 825-6030, ext. 6032 or Toll Free at 1-866-4HALTON (1-866-442-5866) ext. 6032.

**Halton Region is committed to delivering quality service to its customers. Our managers in the Environmental Services Division are highly qualified professionals dedicated to providing you with safe, clean drinking water. So go ahead and have a sip.**



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Questions or comments regarding the Provincial Regulation and this public notification should be directed to:

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