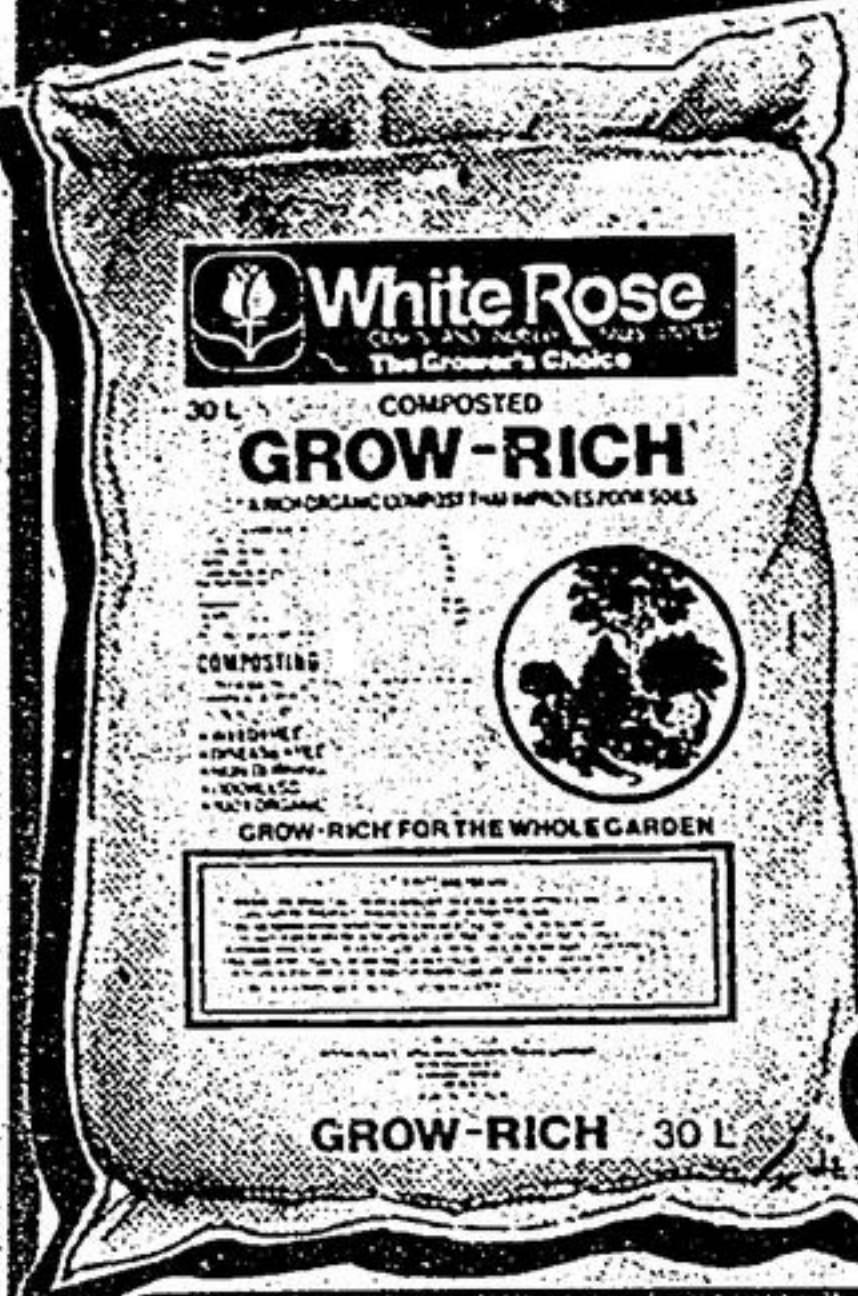


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Local chopper pilot Wilfred MacDonald is happiest when he's hovering at 100-foot heights. The Stouffville resident has helped police in missing person cases and once used his helicopter to avoid a traffic jam. Originally an airplane pilot, Wilfred became interested in helicopters because he believes they offer more flying excitement. — Bruce Stapley.

Chopper pilot enjoys life above the crowd

By BRUCE STAPLEY
Wilfred MacDonald checks his gauges one last time, closes the door of his Robinson R22 HP helicopter, and guides the little two-seater up into the air, past his neighbor's cornfields.

"I live to fly," says the farmer-entrepreneur, whose 50-acre farm on the Sixth Line north of Stouffville Road includes a licenced heliport. "If there's a purpose, then I go up."

The purpose can range from helping police locate missing persons to providing a thrill for a curious journalist. Ever since Wilfred, his wife Yvonne and daughter Laurie moved to the area from Willowdale in 1979, he has had a passion for chopper flying.

An ex-airplane pilot, he flew for a Canadian senator for 16 years. But he's decided that a helicopter gives more options than a plane, and has a greater potential for excitement.

"We used to go back and forth from our cottage on Rice Lake in my Cessna Amphibian," he recalls. "But it wasn't a great lake for landing a plane. It's ideal for a helicopter."

He bought his first chopper in 1979, a Hughes 300 model. Eventually he saw one like the model he now flies and it was love at first sight.

For sale
"I got a copy of the *Chopper Shopper*, a Florida publication that lists helicopters for sale," he explains. "We were going to just keep on driving until we found one. We ended up driving all the way to Nashville, Tennessee."

The Robinson R22 is a 160-horsepower machine, "derated" to 124 horsepower.

That means it can be flown continuously at 75 per cent of its full power.

"Even when you're landing, you still need much of your power," states Wilfred. "It's not at all like an airplane, where you detrottle."

The chopper is basically maintenance-free, he says, and is used in the United States for police work.

"You can hover at 100 feet, and move from side to side," he says. "And you get a bird's-eye view from it."

It is adaptable for water landings with floats, and comes equipped with 2,000-hour blades. It would probably sell for about \$120,000 brand new, Wilfred said.

Police scanner
He has put in 500 hours of flying time in the Robinson since bringing it home in 1984, but he admits he hasn't flown much this summer because of the heat.

"I've probably flown about three hours all summer," he says. "It's no fun in that thing when it's tremendously hot."

He claims to thoroughly enjoy the volunteer work he has done with the York Regional Police, and hopes to get the opportunity to assist more in the future.

"I was out looking for Christine Jessop for seven hours when the police were looking for her," he says of the Queensville girl who disappeared and was later found murdered a few years ago.

He has also helped police in their search for missing persons, and feels he could be valuable in locating stolen goods like vehicles and farm machinery.

Wilfred claims the helicopter comes in handy for many day-to-day functions like roaming over

his fields to check his corn crop.

"I remember one Friday afternoon around four o'clock I was working on one of my trucks. I needed some parts. The traffic can be bad at that time, so I just took the chopper over and landed on the big front lawn of the parts plant."

Positive purpose

He'll fly off to ploughing matches, or for farm-related pursuits such as checking out a tractor he's interested in purchasing.

But above all else, he is constantly searching out opportunities to be of assistance with his machine.

"It's nice to have a positive purpose to take the chopper out," he says.

The helicopter has evoked considerable interest from neighbors who are forever asking for a ride and even a Trent University student who made Wilfred's Robinson a school project.

"She was taking a course on helicopters," he relates. "She did a video, and conducted an interview while we were in the air."

Wilfred is a self-confessed mechanical handyman who does most of his own repairs to his farm equipment.

And while he is not licenced to do any complicated work on his chopper, he believes he would probably be just as capable as the licenced engineers.

"I know this machine better than the engineers," he claims. "But I can only do basic maintenance functions like lube and oil changes."

Wilfred says he wouldn't be interested in getting a charter so he could fly commercially.

"It's just a hobby. That way it stays fun," he says.

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