

ON THE MARCH

Organic farming comes to York Region as demand for pesticide-free food outstrips supply

BY HANNELORE VOLPE
Staff Writer

David and Annice Passafiume are part of a new wave of farmers in Canadian agriculture.

They operate the only certified organic pick-your-own farm in York Region, on the Stouffville/Markham border.

Their first crop of organic strawberries goes on sale Monday. Raspberries, peas and other small fruits and vegetables will follow.

The Canadian Organic Growers organization lists only seven pick-your-own organic farms in the Greater Toronto Area. One is in Durham Region.

The number of farms using at least some organic practices across Canada has grown from 2,230 in 2001 to 3,555 in 2006.

It took six years to change the Passafiume's five-acre farm to an organic operation. A crop of alfalfa and timothy hay was grown for five years, then plowed under.

This "green manure" cleaned any remnants of pesticides from the soil and provided nourishment for strawberries and other fruits, Mr. Passafiume said.

To be certified as an organic farm, the soil has to be free from pesticides and artificial fertilizers for at least three years.

This year, the family planted 1,000 apple trees and 20,000 more strawberry plants, Mrs. Passafiume noted.

The family's aim is to promote sustainable living and farming, she added.

One of the ways they're trying to discourage the tarnish plant bug that leaves strawberries with what some call "funny faces", is to plant clover nearby.

They're trying a variety of strategies and techniques to see what works best.

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Called Organics Farm, the Passafiume's operation is inspected by the Organic Crop Producers and Processors Inc. in Lindsay. This is one of about 30 organic certification bodies across Canada.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

Daniel Passafiume, 13, holds up the first crop of organic strawberries with Brittany, 13, (left) mom Annice, Alisa, 10, and dad David at the pick-your-own Organics Farm on Reesor Road, just north of Nineteenth Avenue.

These bodies don't all have the same standards, said Laura Telford, executive director of the Canadian Organic Growers, but they meet or beat the Canadian standard.

As well as annual inspections of organic farms, there are surprise visits.

At the beginning of 2009, the Organic Products Regulations will take effect, meaning all organic growers must have their produce certified to the Canadian standard, Ms Telford said.

Organic farming is labour-intensive and battling weeds without chemicals is a challenge.

But with the help of their children — Daniel, 13, Brittany, 12, and nine-year-old Alisa — all experts in wielding a hoe, the family gets the job done.

A small tiller is used between

the rows, Mr. Passafiume said, but weeds close to plants must be removed with a narrow hoe. "The kids love it," he said.

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Even though they aren't always in the mood to work, "they are proud to be part of the enterprise", he said.

Mr. Passafiume grew up well acquainted with farming on Applewood Farm, his parents' (Frank and Diane Passafiume) strawber-

ry and apple farm on McCowan Road north of Stouffville Road.

David and Annice had a traditional farm in Richmond Hill for 15 years, but had been researching organic farming for some time before that.

"There are still a lot of pesticides, even if you are doing it following the rules," David said.

"You are better off without pesticides, if you can grow that way."

As well, crops grown without pesticides and artificial fertilizers may have more nutrients.

Organics Farm is at 7550 Nineteenth Ave., near Reesor Road on the outskirts of Stouffville.

Call 905-640-5206 to find out which crops are ready for picking or log on to www.organicsfarm.ca

THE LOWDOWN

More information on organic farming and produce is available on the www.cog.ca website.

When you're shopping for organic produce at a store, look for the label of a certifying body.

At a farmers market or pick-your-own operation, the organic certificate should be prominently displayed. If it isn't, ask to see it.

ORGANIC FOOD FACTS

About 1.5 per cent of Canadian farmers use organic farming practices.

From 2005 to 2006, retail sales of organic foods grew by 28 per cent.

Demand for organic foods is outstripping supply. That means most organic food in stores is imported.

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