

SAVING GUELPH'S ORGANIC MAJOR

— CAN YOU HELP? —

By E. Ann Clark

The University of Guelph values its reputation for innovative teaching and has long considered itself the premier agricultural university in Canada. In response to student demand, Guelph's first organic course was taught in 2002.

In 2004/05, the first academic major in organic agriculture in North America was initiated, with the support of Ontario Agricultural College Dean Craig Pearson. Our sister campus at Alfred College then took up the challenge by becoming the first certified organic academic dairy in Canada. The third leg on Guelph's organic 'stool' is the one-hectare Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming (GCUOF), which opened on campus in September 2008 (see details on page 39).

Despite this seemingly robust and committed investment, Guelph now threatens to terminate the organic major, along with other innovative curricula. An arbitrary minimum enrolment threshold of ten students per course and forty students (over four years) for a major has just been imposed, putting nine majors, all minors, and forty courses on the chopping block. Further cuts are threatened. While the ostensible reason is cost-cutting in a time of financial exigency, the actual savings from such unprecedented curriculum cuts appear to be modest. This draconian approach effectively entrenches the long-established agricultural majors, although most are declining in enrolment, while sacrificing the five-year-old organic major, for which enrolment jumped from five students in 2008 to fifteen in 2009.

Of the threatened curricula, only the organic major and courses were saved—given a one-year reprieve in which to bring enrolment up to snuff. Thanks to the herculean efforts of a cadre of committed undergraduate students, buttressed by a heartening upwelling of support from across Canada, the senate voted narrowly (69 to 60) to give us a second chance.



Landman class, November 2008.

To be sustained, the B.Sc. (Agr) Major in Organic Agriculture must meet three goals over the next year:

- 1) increase enrolment dramatically to meet the threshold of forty;
- 2) groom new teachers to replace those retiring; and
- 3) obtain external support to hire sessionals and sustain the GCUOF.

To meet these goals, we need your help. We propose to build on the history of support the organic program at Guelph has enjoyed from the organic sector. Organic Advocates and others funded the early on-farm surveys still used in the organic courses. Likewise, the organic dairy sector contributed both expertise and funding to transform the Alfred Dairy. Groups ranging from the Carrot Cache, to Heifer International, Meridian, FarmStart, and others supported the establishment of the GCUOF.

May we again ask for your help? Specifically:

Enrolment

Potential students need to know about the program. All six organic courses are team-taught by professors in both the biophysical and social sciences. As such, the organic major is designed to be encompassing rather than exclusionary, fully recognizing that farming is one, but not the only one, of many potential careers within the field. Of the current 15 students enrolled in the major, 11 are farmers, of which 8 are organic farmers.

The organic major is attracting students from across Canada and even outside Canada. Through course labs, as well as the recently formed organic club, students visit farms, processors and retailers, meet invited speakers, and gain exposure to internship, job and graduate opportunities. They learn both theory and practice, with the GCUOF offering a living laboratory for students from many disciplines. For more information, see www.organicag.uoguelph.ca.

Teaching

While this may seem an internal matter, it is necessary to emphasize that inadequate organic research funding is hamstringing organic teaching. Even academics interested in organics (and there are such people) cannot justify the time to develop enough depth to teach organics without a complementary organic research program.

You can lobby politicians and others to prioritize research funding for organics, to help Canada join with the E.U., the U.S., Japan and other nations to explore the many services organic farming offers to society. Help them to see that organics is the future, not just for food production, but for

Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming

by Martha Gay Scroggins

The Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming (GCUOF) is being designed and built by students from many disciplines, including resource and environmental engineering, sociology, the Ontario Agricultural College, and the Organic Major.

This past term, many students and staff have been working on class projects to help find solutions for a post-oil and limited-water, sustainable future. One project, rainwater harvesting, is being installed to catch water and bring it to a high point using treadle pumps to enable gravity-fed irrigation.

The produce grown this season will feed primarily the Child Care and Learning Centre (CCLC) and other on-campus food services. Over a hundred children from the centre are involved with growing what they will be eating. The one-hectare (2.5-acre) site is certified organic and the majority of crops are open-pollinated. The arboretum is working with the centre in sourcing old varieties of fruits and nuts that will be central in creating a permaculture setting. As the centre develops, it will be able to teach urban farming, in all seasons, to interested students and the Guelph community.

This season, a program is being created that will allow volunteer workers to learn how to grow food and be able to share in the harvests. Many crops will be trialed and basic infrastructure installed, all in preparation for fall courses.

The students and many others have been actively involved with this centre's development. They all envision a fair, just society, and are passionate about the freedom of food.

Martha Gay Scroggins is the project coordinator for the Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming (GCUOF).

mitigating/sequestering greenhouse gases, creating a livestock sector that welcomes scrutiny, enhancing biodiversity, promoting health through balanced crop growth, safeguarding soil, water and air resources, and buffering crops against unpredictable weather.

Funding

An Organic Trust is being established at Guelph to receive financial donations for teaching—just for teaching. Sessionals are needed to teach some courses where

faculty expertise is lacking. Funding is needed to pay the GCUOF coordinator—Martha Gay Scroggins, a commercial organic market gardener herself—so that she can share what she knows.

If ever there was a time for Guelph, and indeed, for Canada, not just to support but to aggressively expand its efforts in organic agriculture, that time is now. I hope that we can count on you to spread the word to promising students, lobby politicians to support organic research, and send what you can to the Organic

Trust, so that organics can continue to be taught—and taught well—at Guelph. For funding enquiries, contact Paulette Samson (psamson@uoguelph.ca or 519-824-4120 x53768).

For further information, contact E. Ann Clark by email at eaclark@uoguelph.ca or call 519-824-4120 x52508.

Dr. E. Ann Clark is an Associate Professor in Plant Agriculture at the University of Guelph, with teaching and research interests in grazing management and organic agriculture, as well as profiling concerns about genetically engineered crops.

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