



to: OFRF Education and Outreach

Final Project Report for *Crop Planning for Organic Vegetable Growers*
(a COG Practical Skills Handbook)

Project Summary

*Crop Planning for Organic Vegetable Growers*¹ is the 3rd book in the Practical Skills series from Canadian Organic Growers (COG). Part of the mandate of our member-based federal charity is to publish educational materials for organic and transitioning growers.

For market gardeners and farmers, growing 40 to 60 different vegetables at the same time is a challenge in itself. When direct marketing your vegetables, you need to combine that with the requirement to plant regular successions to ensure adequate harvests for each market outlet, whether it is farmgate, farmers market, restaurant and retail supply, or subscription (CSA).

Crop planning is complicated, but this handbook presents it in manageable and logical steps, with good reasoning behind why each step is important and what will be gained by going through the process. It provides readers with a lot of how-to guidance, with templates, examples, a case study running throughout, and real-life success stories.

One reviewer summarized it this way: “The ideas, the data and the examples presented in this book are great for beginning growers who have so much to learn about planning their farming operation, but maybe even more for all of us experienced growers looking for ways to improve our managerial skills and most importantly our bottom line.”²

Introduction to *Crop Planning for Organic Vegetable Growers*

Crop planning for the organic market garden has many variables including variety selection, season length, climate conditions, soil, moisture, start-up versus ongoing land use, whether the operation does continuous or determinate harvests, integration of field and greenhouse, the number and type of markets. Pulling all these planning elements together with organic management methods of crop rotation and soil building is a challenge.

COG’s Practical Skills handbooks aim to be usable and helpful, based both on the latest research and the experience of successful organic growers. Our aim with this *Crop Planning* book was to provide a framework that can be used as-is or adapted to your situation.

¹ Original title in project proposal was *Crop Planning for the Organic Market Garden*.

² Jean-Martin Fortier, ferme Les Jardins de la Grelinette, Quebec

Objectives

The handbook *Crop Planning for the Organic Market Garden* is designed to enable producers to increase their organic production and markets. Organic agriculture is knowledge-intensive, and farmers need information that is easy to access and use.

The “National Strategic Plan for the Canadian Organic Food and Farming Sector,” published in 2002 after consultation with organic growers and processors, identified an information gap. It noted that “Farmer interest has expanded dramatically in recent years, but few supports exist to help farmers interested in farming organically” and “training needs of both a specialized and general category are much greater than the current supply.”³

COG’s publications and workshops provide the education and information that growers need to transition, begin or expand their organic operations.

The objective of the Practical Skills handbooks is to get technical growing information into the hands of as many growers as possible. This will be measured in the long term by:

- book sales, both direct and wholesale;
- attendance at workshops based on the book;
- reviews and recommendations given in various farm media and resource centres for organic and conventional growers, for example newsletters and magazines specific to market gardeners;
- addition of new distribution channels.

Informed growers will be enabled to increase their production, acreage and/or markets – which is also a COG objective. This will be measured (also long-term) by:

- COG’s annual survey of organic production;
- government census data.

Both of these sources will capture any increase in the number of growers or acreage at the market garden scale. While this would be indicative rather than directly attributable to the handbook, it would support achievement of COG’s overall objectives and efforts.

Materials & Methods

COG selected, as authors for this handbook, Frédéric Thériault and Daniel Brisebois, who are two of the five farmers who run Tourne-Sol Cooperative Farm near Montreal, Quebec. The farm has grown quickly in the five years since it was founded, from 30 to 250 CSA customers, plus farmers market sales. Crop planning has played a key role in the success of their operations.

Dan, Fred and the other farm partners met at school, at McGill University in Montreal, studying Plant Sciences, Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Engineering and Ecological Agriculture. Between them they have experience in university teaching, workshop facilitation, and volunteer leadership in agricultural organizations.

³ “National Strategic Plan for the Canadian Organic Food and Farming Sector,” Rod MacRae, Ralph Martin, Anne Macey, Robert Beauchemin and Russ Christianson, 2002.

The crop planning process described in this book was developed over a number of years on different farms. Fred and Dan drew on their studies, farm experience, existing resources, and interviews with vegetable growers across the country. The process was improved over the years in their own farming and in pilot workshops.

The planning process is grounded in Allan Savory's Holistic Management⁴. Savory developed a three-part approach to holistic financial planning which is simplified in the context of the Crop Planning book. Savory recommends planning the income, then the profit and finally, the expenses. This is adapted in the Crop Planning book to: planning gross sales, then determining retained earnings (salary) and finally planning the expenses. One reviewer commented, "I really liked that you framed the whole process within Holistic Management principles. Thinking about, planning for, and re-evaluating our farms as whole entities is vital to their health and sustainability in the long term – not to mention ours as farmers."⁵

The pilot workshops helped to refine the approach of using a case study that develops throughout the book. Bruce and Hannah, a fictitious couple just starting out, illustrate each step with their own decisions and planning charts.

Fred and Dan spent a lot of time talking to several growers about how they plan their crops. Not everyone's crop planning processes were as mathematical and as detailed as theirs. The general outline was the same for all the successful farmers they spoke with: set objectives for the season, figure out roughly how much to grow, order the seeds, take some notes during the growing season, and use those notes to plan the following year.

However, Fred and Dan applied data about specific crops as well as "safety factors" to develop a much more comprehensive and detailed plan. Following their formulas gives a vegetable grower not only a complete seed order, but more importantly a week-by-week calendar of greenhouse and field operations, plus templates to record harvests and sales so that the method can be customized the following year.

The book profiles eleven vegetable growers, showcasing a range of operations from a small intensive acreage that works with walking tractors and hand tools, to large farms that rely on cultivating tractors and sizeable workforces. They are all examples of how good crop planning helps a farm thrive. Farm profiles are one of the favorite features of COG books.

For quality assurance, various drafts of the book were reviewed by other market gardeners who provided valuable feedback on improving the content and approach.

Project Results

The result of this project is the publication of a 136-page handbook, *Crop Planning for Organic Vegetable Growers*. A one-day workshop based on the book has also been developed and delivered several times.

⁴ Savory, Allan & Butterfield, Jody. 1999. *Holistic Management: A New Framework for Decision Making*. Island Press.

⁵ Michelle Jory, Fairmeadow Farm, Ontario.

The Crop Planning process presented in the book is usable in either computer or paper-based formats. Templates for use with MS Excel are available on the COG website.

The Crop Planning process is useful for vegetable growers regardless of their level of experience or size of their operation. Its methods apply not only to commercial growers but also to homesteaders. As well, the planning process will appeal to non-organic market growers though the organic focus of the book includes crop rotations that are the basis of soil building.

The eleven steps presented in the book are:

1. Set your financial goals
2. Develop a marketing plan
3. Make field planting schedules
4. Create crop maps
5. Choose vegetable varieties and finalize planting schedule
6. Generate greenhouse schedules
7. Fill out a seed order
8. Make a field operations calendar
9. Carry out the crop plan
10. Analyse crop profitability
11. Plan for next year

Along the way, the method explores:

- Figuring out initial sales projections in terms of financial needs and stocking a CSA and/or market stand;
- Approaching crop planning mathematically and systematically: calculating the quantities, planting dates and planting frequencies of each vegetable needed to meet sales projections; dividing the types of vegetable according to their different growing and harvesting characteristics to facilitate planning (comprehensive vegetable reference charts are included)
- Estimating the yields and safety factors to ensure the targets are met and how these numbers change as the grower's skills improve and the crop plan matures
- Considering the big picture in the crop plan: bed and field layout, crop rotation, soil-building, organic regulations and management practices, and how one year's crop plan fits into a multi-year perspective;
- Monitoring the crop plan and keeping records: keeping on top of the plan through the season and how to modify the plans on the fly to keep production on track
- Reviewing the crop plan as the season ends in terms of profitability in space and time and how this leads into next year's plan

Conclusions

Initial feedback about *Crop Planning for the Organic Vegetable Growers* has been overwhelmingly positive. As an example of the mail that COG received within two weeks of the book's release:

“It is truly beautiful and useful.” –DF

“Brilliant, thoughtful, and looks to me to be an incredibly useful tool for any farmer/grower. I like how you start with goals and marketing notions and especially that you look at the desired outcome/yield as the base for all the planning, and then work back to the steps required to attain these. You and your farm's contribution to the new agriculture is not only inspiring, your approach of sharing your successful methods provides empowerment to many aspiring and in the field.” - MW

“Looks amazing, way to go COG!” - HI

We sincerely appreciate the contributions of our major funding partners that made this book possible: the Organic Farming Research Foundation and the Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food (ACAAF) program of the federal government department Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Outreach

Crop Planning for the Organic Vegetable Growers is available for purchase several ways:

- direct from COG, online at www.cog.ca, by phone at 613-216-0741 or email publications@cog.ca
- from several seed companies on their websites or print catalogues (for 2011) (Specific companies in America and Canada are under negotiation at the time of this report.)
- other distribution partners - to be confirmed, but other COG books are carried by Acres USA, ACORN (Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network), MOSES (Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service), and others. Review copies have been sent to MOSES, Vesey's Seeds, West Coast Seeds, Johnny's Seeds, and Growing for Market, for their consideration for resale.

The book price is \$19 Canadian for COG members, \$22 for non-members. Complimentary copies are available on request to public information centers and farm organizations. When used as part of a workshop curriculum, the book is included in workshop tuition.

Crop Planning for the Organic Vegetable Growers is applicable regardless of geographic location or even organic persuasion. Vegetable growers in any country will find the planning method valuable, and non-organic growers will learn not only a great planning tool but also about crop rotations that build better soil.

There have already been four one-day workshops presented, based on the book, with a combined total of 102 participants (capacity attendance at each).

Media releases were sent to farm media across North America, both organic and conventional, and to organic-grower and vegetable-grower organizations. Ads so far are running in ACORN's newsletter, Small Farm Canada, The Canadian Organic Grower, with more planned (including Acres USA in the fall). Details of the book are available on the COG website www.cog.ca and on COG's Facebook page.

References

See pages 134-136 of the book.

Addenda

1. two copies of the handbook *Crop Planning for Organic Vegetable Growers* (being sent by mail separately)
2. advertising layouts, so far scheduled in the magazines *The Canadian Organic Grower*, *Acres USA*, *Small Farm Canada*
3. media release
4. graphics files of the book's cover image and the authors

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