

Martin Entz co-chairs the first Canadian scientific organic conference

by Nicole Boudreau

October 2011



Why has Martin Entz been involved in organic agriculture since 1990?

“Because of the wonder of nature,” he answers, “there are so many interesting things we can learn from!”

But Martin also has a critical opinion on agribusinesses who argue that organic agriculture cannot feed the planet.

“In North America we throw 40 to 50 % of our food in the garbage - why are we obsessed with producing more? We have a billion people that are overweight. If we are going to talk about global food security as a reason not to do organic agriculture, we need to have the full conversation. Companies producing GE crops are involved in military research; most of our food insecurity is generally based on lack of security, like displaced people. Let’s look at the whole picture: I get mad when I hear agribusiness using global food security as a marketing argument; that is too simple. There is a much bigger conversation behind that!”

Martin Entz is slim, and he does not seem to be overeating. He is an organic researcher at the University of Manitoba.

“Sustainable food production is much more important than a particular economical model that exists today; there are a lot of family-run and medium size companies very much interested in organic agriculture, dealing with organic food and making a living doing it.”

Born in Dominion City, MB, Entz is the son of East German immigrants who transported their lives from Germany to Canada and had to make all kinds of mistakes to figure out how to do things. “I was lucky to experience that spirit of pioneering”, says Entz. “As an immigrant kid, I heard stories all the time about how poor the crop rotation systems were in Canada. Canadian agriculture is very exploitative compared with the European model.”

Entz was naturally attracted to agriculture and did a PhD at the University of Winnipeg in drought physiology, while always keeping an interest in international development. He did some international development work, such as in North Korea, with different NGOs and has traveled all of the world’s continents to observe how sustainable agriculture is performed. “Organic farming can be practiced anywhere in the world because nature functions everywhere in the world. Unlike agribusiness, which wants to do the same thing everywhere, organic farming systems need to be site specific, in tune with the place where it is practiced. Perhaps that is why the corporate world finds difficulties with organic farming; they want to have uniformity, and models that are easy to apply.”

But producing wheat in the Prairie, cheese in Quebec and potatoes in the Maritimes is not assuring a good and sustainable farm system. Entz likes to point people to an organization in Southern India, the [Center for Indian Knowledge Systems](#), which is trying to preserve indigenous knowledge for integrated farming in Southern India "...because they believe that this is the best way to have food security".

"Good extension knowledge is really what organic farmers have suffered for the most in Canada as well", comments Entz. "Maybe it has been good that they had to do this by themselves, but even today there is so little education for organic farmers; that is one of their biggest problems."

But there is good news about organic research. Entz comments that the current OSC funding is unbelievable. "It really is unprecedented that we, in Canada, have almost as much money going into organic agriculture research as we do, for example, into canola research. I am very happy with what the government has done, also very happy with what a whole host of organizations have done, including OACC and OFC, to make it all happen, because it did not just happen by itself".

"I have connected with my German background so much more since I have funding to research organic agriculture because there is so much going on in Europe; it is really exciting!"

Entz has always been active in organic research, but not at this level. Local funding agencies have been pretty good at supporting his work, largely because they believe that innovations coming out of organic research will be useful for all farmers. He also has graduate students who have scholarships and bring their own funding with them. "They are idealistic, want to change the world and study organic agriculture!" Entz, who appreciates working closely with farmers, insists on having his graduate students interact with farmers as well.

Long-term studies are his organic research obsession. "I always loved long-term field studies. At the university here, we have just finished 19 seasons at [Glenlea](#). I also have visited many long-term studies in Australia, Europe, South America and Asia; it really helps us explain some of the processes, what are the problems, where we are going."

Entz has a couple of words for people who argue that organic yields are lower. "Watch out! Yes, organic yields are lower, but they are catching up. Secondly, look at the organic yield that we have been able to achieve with almost no educational support for the farmers!"

Organic farming will survive GE contamination, comments Entz. There may be extremely low levels of contamination, much like pesticides on the planet: there is a little bit of pesticide in almost everything... "that does not mean that we should give up on organic farming. In fact, I think we should put more effort into systems that don't add more pesticides and GE food to that global circulation."

As a hobby, Entz writes stories, mostly historical fiction and short stories. "It helps me deal with frustrations and keep positive".

Entz is the co-chair of the first [Canadian Organic Science Conference](#), to be held in Winnipeg in February 2012. Let's hope that Martin Entz will continue writing and researching; that makes us feel positive too.