Iowa organic grower overcomes challenges, harvests soil health benefits

Organic farmer Roger Lansink says the success or failure of his operation rests squarely on his shoulders. “We can't blame any crop failures on synthetic inputs—because we don't use any,” he says.

“But,” he adds, “we can also take all the credit for raising a successful, healthy crop.”

The good news is the Lansinks often get to take credit for their successes. “The quality of our corn and beans has been improving quite nicely,” he says. “The last time we tested our corn it tested 9 and 9.5 on protein levels. For most corn coming into the feed mills right now, six to seven is the average range for conventional corn, so I think we are doing pretty well.”

Thanks to his focus on improving soil health, “The color, the texture of the soil is changing and we’re seeing all kinds of improvements and benefits,” Roger Lansink says.
Unlocking the potential

The secret to the Lansink family’s growing success is rooted deeply in healthy soil. “With organic agriculture, in particular, productive, healthy crops begin in healthy soil,” he says.

As a result, much of the Lansink’s farm management efforts are focused on practices that enable soil microorganisms to help them unlock their farm’s potential. Cover crops (also called green manures) and diverse cropping rotations provide the foundation for the farm’s soil health management system.

Mr. Lansink says it’s important to plant crops in an appropriate rotation sequence so they can enhance the soil’s nutrient availability for the following crop. Likewise, the use of cover crops further feed the biology in the soil and the integrations of livestock manure also supplements the Lansink’s soil fertility.

But farming using soil health principles wasn’t always a part of Mr. Lansink’s approach. He grew up on a conventional farm and began his farming career using conventional farming techniques. He and his family transitioned to organic production in 1995 after reading about successful organic farming operations in other parts of the country and after talking with organic farmers in the area.

“We just kind of figured if they can do it, we can do it, and so we got really enthused about it,” he says.

Today, the Lansinks farm 850 acres of certified organic field crops including oats, corn, soy, barley, peas, and alfalfa near Odebolt, Iowa. In addition, they have pasture for cattle, and custom feed turkeys for a national food processor.

Certified organic soybeans are among the crops grown on the Lansink farm, near Odebolt, Iowa.
Overcoming the tillage challenge

One of the principle pillars of soil health management is limiting soil disturbance. However, this creates challenges for organic producers like the Lansinks.

“We cannot use chemicals to terminate a green manure or a cover crop, so we have to use tillage,” he says. “But we try to minimize that tillage as much as possible. We try to incorporate that green manure as close to planting the next crop or the following crop so that the soil is disturbed for just a short amount of time.”

As a result of these efforts, the farm’s soil health improvements have been dramatic.

“We are finding out that the negative effects of the tillage are not as bad as when we came out of a conventional system into the organic system,” he says. “Our soils are loosening up, they are becoming more compatible with what we are doing and so the fertility level is coming up—the color, the texture of the soil is changing and we’re seeing all kinds of improvements and benefits.”

Sharing, caring and educating

Mr. Lansink has served on the Iowa Organic Advisory board since 1998 and is a founding member and President of the Iowa Organic Association. “Our main objective is education—to help farmers become organic producers, to educate consumers and to promote the industry,” he says.

And what is the best education advice he would give when it comes to soil health management in an organic system?

“My recommendation is always start slow, start small,” he says. “Don’t put the whole farm into a green manure or cover crop right away. Start small and diversify, don’t just use one, use a couple of different options and don’t plant your cover crops real thick at first. “Start out very light and work your way up.”

But Mr. Lansink’s best advice isn’t limited to organic growers.

“I would encourage all farmers, no matter what style of operation, to pay attention to soil health,” he says. “I know we need to produce food for the world, I understand that, but we need to do so in a way that will preserve the soil for future generations.”

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