

Serious about growing organic

In response to climate change concerns, one new Ottawa Valley farmer has taken some different steps to produce crops he can be proud of, writes Laura Robin. Laura Robin

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In a few weeks, you may spot a new vendor at Ottawa Farmers' Market. But you won't see his produce - just his boxes.

Alex Severinsky, 69, is doing things differently. The inventor from Ukraine thinks he may be the first in the Ottawa area to grow and sell 100-per-cent certified organic berries: red, yellow and black raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, gooseberries, black currants and even elderberries.

But going organic is not all he is doing differently. He won't sell his berries in open baskets.

"If berries are exposed to sun and warm air, within four hours they lose 70 per cent of their value - there will be no vitamins left and they will become mushy," says Severinsky, who operates two companies in Washington, D.C., in the winter, but who bought a farm near Shawville, Que., two years ago.

Instead, he sells his berries in special boxes he designed with ventilation in the bottom or sides, but closed tops to keep the light out. The attractive cardboard boxes - some of which have a Chagall print on the top - are also shallow, so that they hold just a single layer of raspberries or strawberries.

"If berries aren't in a single layer, they crush each other," says Severinsky, who calls his farm Ste-Valentine, after his wife Valentina. Each of his boxes of berries, which will be kept chilled, is also labelled with the date the berries were picked.

"No one else can put on a date, because if you saw the date on most of them, you'd never buy them," says Severinsky. "Can you imagine what the date would be



CREDIT: Photos By Pat Mcgrath, Ottawa Citizen

Alex Severinsky, shown here with his farm's black raspberries, is just starting to sell his organic berries in the Ottawa area.



CREDIT: Pat Mcgrath, The Ottawa Citizen
Alex Severinsky may be the first in the area to grow certified organic berries. His son will start selling his yellow, black and red black raspberries at Ottawa Farmers' Market in the next few weeks.

on berries from California?" Severinsky is serious about his Ottawa Valley farm, which he found after two years of searching.

With a PhD in electrical engineering, Severinsky became an inventor after he and his wife, a medical doctor, moved from the former Soviet Union to the U.S. He went on to establish two companies, one involved in manufacturing hybrid cars and another that makes fuel from recycled carbon dioxide and nuclear energy.

But Severin sky says he became disillusioned after helping develop hybrid cars (one of which he drives.) "With a reduction in fuel consumption, people just started building more cars - so energy conservation doesn't work that way."

At the same time, he was becoming more concerned about climate change.

STE-VALENTINE FARM

What: Certified organic berries, mainly raspberries and blueberries Where grown: Near Shawville, Que.

Where sold: Through Bryson Farms' home delivery, through Marché de Solidarité Regionale de l'Outaouais co-op, at the Glebe Metro and Ottawa

Farmers' Market When: Berries are expected to arrive at the Metro and Ottawa Farmers' Market in the next few weeks and be available until frost How much: Likely from \$4 to \$6 for a 0.6 pint box Online info: Ste-Valentine.ca

"I saw Al Gore's movie and talked to some leading scientists. Several of them had moved to farms. My wife and I discussed it and decided that because of what is waiting for us, in terms of climate change, the best solution is the small family farm."

He also decided that the very best place in North America to have a small, self-sufficient farm is on the north side of the Ottawa River, between Gatineau and Shawville. "It has the right combination of temperature and moisture," says Severinsky. "I consulted an agronomist who used NASA data. There's a big difference in terms of temperature between Washington, D.C., and Ottawa. Northern New York has no soil, just stone. Central Canada is too far inside the continent and susceptible to drought. The Maritimes are mostly too rocky. The area between Gatineau and Shawville is close to the river, on the north side where the soil is good, but not too close."

And now Severinsky is developing the farm for himself and his wife, but also for his son and his family, who live in Montreal but visit regularly to work on the farm. It will likely be his son, James Turner, who will sell the berries at the Ottawa Farmers' Market.

Severinsky says he expects his granddaughters will live on the farm one day and maybe relatives from other parts of the world. "You never know when people are going to need to come because of climate change."

He has planted one hectare with berries, which he says is an optimal crop to grow in terms of the ratio of water needed to expected profits, but has installed enough capacity to irrigate twice as large an area. Water comes from a well on the property.

Instead of insecticides, he grows a border of wildflowers that attracts insects that attack the bigger bugs that might prey on the berries. Instead of fertilizers, he grows his own organic rye and vetch to use as mulch on the crops.

He has also planted a large orchard of fruit trees, even peaches ("that's because of climate change," he says), plans to have hives to produce organic honey, has grown wheat and sunflowers, and has a big vegetable garden.

"It isn't easy to do without chemicals - nothing is simple," Severinsky admits.
"Everything must be in balance in nature. But if it is not organic, it doesn't exist for us. We just pass it by."

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