

It's berry tough work growing organically but Clarendon farmer says it's worth it



Alex Severinsky picks some raspberries from a bush at his organic farm in Clarendon.



Signs are set up in front of each row of fruit, revealing what kind of fruit it is.

ANDREA CRANFIELD
Equity Editor
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Alex Severinsky picks a handful of red raspberries and pops them into his mouth smiling. "They are so good," he says.

He then tries some yellow raspberries from his orchard. "These ones are even better," he says, enjoying the freshly picked fruit.

Severinsky bought a piece of property in Clarendon two years ago and has since created a thriving berry business by growing and selling strawberries, black, yellow and red raspberries, mulberries, blackberries, gooseberries, black currants, blueberries and elderberries.

There are about 35 rows of berries growing at Severinsky's farm, called Ste-Valentine Farm.

Besides berries, he also grows different kinds of fruit including peaches, apricots, plums, nectarines and sweet cherries.

All of the fruits are harvested at different times and they take different amounts of time to grow and ripen. Some fruits can take as long as five years before they are ready to sell.

All the berries have different growing requirements. Severinsky explains that the blackberries were finicky this year because it rained too much and there was not enough sun.

"Rain is good for blueberries but bad for raspberries but all of them need sun," says Severinsky.

It takes time for gooseberries to grow, and Severinsky says Clarendon is too far south for them to do well because gooseberries thrive in cooler weather.

He realizes, however, that weather is the one thing he can't control.

"This is why you want to have a variety because not everything will work out. You can't get 100 per cent but at least it will be something. Pests will eat only some, disease will kill some, if there's rain or drought or too much sun or not enough sun, but something will grow," says Severinsky. "Something will work out."

In yet another field, Severinsky grows his own organic mulch, which he uses to feed the fruit trees and bushes instead of using fertilizer. The mulch is also used as a replacement for herbicides.

"The mulch we grow is a mixture of legumes, which has nitrogen and rye, which is harvested green. It brings all the nutrients in the right combination to the berry rows," says Severinsky. "So you don't need to use any fertilizer."

Severinsky came to Clarendon in 2010. But he

only lives in Pontiac during the harvesting season, and spends his winters in Washington, DC, where he owns two technology businesses.

He and his wife, Valentina, looked for an ideal place to grow fruits in the Outaouais region for several years before finding the Clarendon farm. After discovering that it was "too story" on the Ontario side, Severinsky started looking in Quebec.

"This side, you have clay and you have sand and you have good soil," says Severinsky about Ste-Valentine's. "When you start looking for land, then you go to maps and soil maps and you find where soil is. But if you go north from Ottawa, the Shawville area is the only (place) with some amount of productive land because in between you have clay and sand and here is a lot of class two soil, which is (used) to grow crops."

In 2010, Severinsky started preparing the soil for fruit and first planted berries in 2011. Only a small amount of berries grew in 2012.

This year, as he walks past row after row of berry bushes full of colourful berries, he stops every so often to eat another piece of fruit. He doesn't bother washing the berries first.

"You can eat them right from the bush because there are no chemicals," he says.

Different kinds of berry bushes are alternated so that there are not two rows of the same berries planted beside each other. This, says Severinsky, is to deter bugs or birds from feasting on the sweet fruit.

"Every row is different so pests have less ability to propagate ... I interweave raspberries and blueberries so the pests will not propagate. So they're all interweaved but it takes special effort because the PH for soil here (raspberries) should be below five but there (blueberries) should be around seven so we feed them lemonade," says Severinsky. "Everything is grown on an irrigated system and the soil is made more acidic with organic citric acid."

Severinsky is, he believes, the only 100 per cent certified organic fruit grower in the Ottawa area. Everything he grows is certified organic meaning he follows the rules and regulations as outlined by Quebec Vrai, a company offering certification services.

Once a year, representatives visit Severinsky's farm and check that he followed the rules outlined by the Canadian Organic Association.

"I need to show everything, what I bought, all my

invoices, if it's a new product, and show that it is coming in compliance with Canadian standards," says Severinsky.

Severinsky doesn't use any chemicals on anything he grows.

Originally from Ukraine, Severinsky wanted to grow food that tasted like the fruit he used to eat back home when he was a child.

"It is a lot of work," he said about growing organically. "I had an idea that I want to have the same fruit in taste that my mother bought me from the farmers market back in the Ukraine because I came from the Ukraine. And it's not here."

Severinsky says that the quality of food has deteriorated in quality in the past 20 years.

He found that there was a

biological control. "Because in nature, everybody eats each other and we are eaten by viruses, bacteria, everything is in the food chain. The bugs too," he says. "We don't disrupt it. We have to live in peace with nature. Don't go to war because you're going to lose."

Being certified organic means that using pesticides is not allowed. However, some herbicides used to kill weeds are OK to use.

"Plants are stronger than pests so if pesticides are bad, can you imagine how bad the herbicide which kills grass is? So this is out of the question, there's not even a matter of discussion," says Severinsky.

There are no dates on 2010 but you see, getting away from pesticides, herbicides is only half of this story. The other half of this story is that you need to harvest it ripe. Like, today you see some raspberries are not good enough, they are not ripe, so I left them. And the ones which easily get soft I take it."

Often, fruits such as strawberries and raspberries are shipped to Quebec and Ontario from the United States or even further. Severinsky explains that the fruits are picked when they are unripe so that they ripen on route to their final destination.

"If you want to deliver from California to Ottawa, then you need to harvest them really not ripe. But they give all their vitamins and sweetness in the last two days of ripening, not the week before. That's why when you buy certified organic products, which are delivered from far away, they taste like Styrofoam. There is nothing there," says Severinsky.

"So while it is certified organic, you don't get poisoned, but you don't get nutrients either. It doesn't do any good."

If the berries are not harvested when they are ripe, then they lose all their nutrients, says Severinsky.

He refuses to sell his fruit any further away than Ottawa, to ensure that the product is delivered fresh and ripe.

He uses special boxes, which he designed himself, to deliver strawberries and raspberries. "Raspberries are a very fragile fruit so we use a special package with one layer because they are very fresh so they should not sit on the top of each other," said Severinsky.

Often times in grocery stores, boxes of strawberries and raspberries are sold where the berries are piled on top of each other. But the label read that when dealing with the spray, protective clothing should be worn and people should not go near the crops for 45 days after they were sprayed.

"So it's already no," says Severinsky. "If I have to wear a space suit, why do I want to eat it?"

The crop expert also told Severinsky that if he killed the small bug, then another bug that the small bugs eat will flourish. "But if there is no remedy against the other bug, it's better to have this bug," says Severinsky.

To combat the insect problem, Severinsky buys nematodes, which are small bugs that are sprayed into the soil and eat the larvae of other bugs. Severinsky calls

it biological control. "Because in nature, everybody eats each other and we are eaten by viruses, bacteria, everything is in the food chain. The bugs too," he says. "We don't disrupt it. We have to live in peace with nature. Don't go to war because you're going to lose."

There are holes in the bottom of the boxes so the berries stay fresh and also so that people can wash the fruits while they are still in the box.

"From the moment you pick the food from the bush, it starts decaying. You want to put it in the refrigerator as soon as possible to stop the decaying process. So you need to give air circulation for those gases coming out, give them room to escape."

"They are in small portions because when you get them out of the refrigerator then you need to eat it (right away) so there's no point to give big boxes which you will not eat. So it should be small portions so you can buy several boxes and eat one at a time," says Severinsky.

There are also dates on the boxes so that customers know when the berries were harvested.

"It's (a date) very important on berries because it should be one or two days old otherwise it's useless," says Severinsky. "You have to refrigerate them within like one hour from when you pick them or they lose their ripeness ... If you leave them for four hours (they) will lose 90 per cent of their vitamins."

If the berries are not eaten within a day or two, Severinsky freezes them so that they retain their nutritional value.

"We harvest them now every day because they ripen every day and then you need to sell them or freeze them, you have two different ways," says Severinsky.

He believes customers continue to buy his products because they are delivered fresh, ripe and full of nutrients.

"It will be harvested very ripe so it's like in my mother country. My mother would bring those foods that were so good, so I want to be able to have the same thing to give to other people," says Severinsky.

Organically is a lot more work and it also costs more, but Severinsky says it's well worth it.

"We believed in Ukraine, in comparison with income, food costs a lot. So you have to pay 50 to 60 per cent of your income for food. But this was food and here people mislead themselves, they think it is food but it's not," he said. "But food costs a lot and some people understand what food is. Organic should cost two to three times more than (non-organic food). I don't call it food, I call it feed."

Severinsky says his policy is simple.

"Don't use any chemicals harmful to living beings. And harvest ripe to sell within one or two days and use it ... And make it so it is not poisonous and very nutritious and tasty. Because nature's foods, foods grown in nature and harvested ripe always taste good."



Raspberries and strawberries are kept in specially designed boxes.



Alex Severinsky stands in front of approximately 35 rows of fruit bushes at his farm in Clarendon.