

# ORGANIC ADVOCATES TEAM UP WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

*By Nafessa Jalal*

**“We need to be the change we wish to see in the world.” So said Mahatma Gandhi, and if ever there was a time to heed his words, it is now.**

**I**n a nutshell, we are living beyond our means. North Americans have come to see a consumer-focused lifestyle as normal and praiseworthy, even as it diminishes and degrades our limited supply of natural resources. But some are showing that there is another way, that we can have our cake and eat it too—with a lifestyle that is not just sustainable but personally rewarding.

Chefs Jamie Kennedy and Michael Stadlander are two such people. In 1989, they established Organic Advocates, a non-profit organization of organic producers, environmentally concerned chefs and food professionals, and enlightened consumers. Organic Advocates seeks to raise awareness of organic agriculture and promote environmental responsibility and healthy living through education, research and advocacy.

Each year Organic Advocates hosts Feast of Fields in Ontario, a much anticipated annual fundraiser. This white linen event invites people to sample the offerings of prestigious chefs, vintners, and brewmasters at canopied stations distributed across several acres of scenic rural landscape. Dozens of venues offer original, local and organic delights, cooked on-site over campfires by cadres of culinary staff from the best restaurants. To reinforce the ‘green’ goal of sustainable living, rather than using

disposable plates, mouth-watering treats are offered in bite-sized portions on anything from sturdy bread crusts to leaves of kale. Over the course of an afternoon, guests ‘graze’ across the landscape, sampling

exquisite and original cuisine and diverse wines and beers, while visiting with farmers and food enthusiasts and just soaking up the good vibes.

Proceeds from these annual events are donated to a group or organization working in sustainable living and organic agriculture. The latest beneficiary was the University of Guelph’s Organic

Agriculture Program, which received a cheque for \$5000 at the 2010 annual Guelph Organic Conference. The foresight and commitment of groups, such as Organic Advocates, are bringing organic into the mainstream of farming and of the food movement.

Students in the University of Guelph’s Organic Agriculture Program are learning, and, by their example, teaching the principles of moral, social and environmental responsibility. In part, through their initiative, the university is committed to buying local, seasonal products as much as possible, with a minimum target of 40%. Food choices on campus have also expanded to include vegetarian, vegan and fair-trade options.



*In the Garden2Table program, elementary students learn to grow, cook and enjoy organic vegetables.*



*Growers of all ages participate in the gardens at the Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming.*

Starting in 2004, the University of Guelph became the first school in North America to offer an academic major in Organic Agriculture.<sup>1</sup> The organic major is also supported by a suite of other innovative elements. Largely through the generosity of visionary donors, the one-hectare Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming (GCUOF) opened at the campus arboretum in 2008. Under the guidance of a professional organic market gardener, Martha Gay Scroggins, university students and the broader community learn all aspects of year-round organic food production and resource conservation for a post-oil future. In addition, the entire dairy herd at Alfred College has recently completed the three-year transition to organic. Alfred College, along with the Ridgetown and Kemptville

1. For details on the Guelph Organic Agriculture Program, see *TCOG* Summer 2009.

Colleges, offer applied agricultural education affiliated with the University of Guelph.

There are many spin-off benefits of this concentration on organics. Bruce McAdams, a professor in Hospitality and Tourism Management, took the initiative of creating the Garden2Table program last fall. This initiative, which is supported by an annual fundraising supper crafted by local chefs, brings elementary school students to the GCUOF to learn about food. A fitting end to their unique experience is the meal prepared and

shared by the students and made from their own produce. Currently, an Organic House is being established adjacent to the GCUOF, where students in the organic program will live.

Guelph is unique among Canadian universities in offering both academic and applied learning in organics on campus, an approach which is attracting a growing number of students from across the country and beyond. Although slated for termination a year ago as part of cost-cutting measures (as elsewhere), student initiative helped to promote the program, bring up enrolment, and ensure a future for this young and innovative program.

Public demand for organic food and support for organic production and processing methods have grown by leaps and bounds in the last twenty years. A broad stream of employment and growth opportunities is evolving. Organic farming affects the nutritional

content and safety of our food, as well as food security. Making the transition to organic farming affects our environment in many ways, including changing the levels of greenhouse gas production and carbon sequestration. Opportunities in this field are blossoming, as individuals and organizations take up the challenge of personal health and environmental responsibility.

Be the change you want to see in the world. Yes, you can.

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ACORN has a decade's worth of organic information available on our website:  
**[www.acornorganic.org](http://www.acornorganic.org)**

- Organic Path: *the Business of Transition*
- Community Supported Agriculture
- Green Manures
- Cover Crops
- Value-Added
- Soil workshops
- Hosting Apprentices
- Post-harvest handling
- Small farm machinery
- Garden Centre Organic Resources

