



# Saanich Organics

A model for sustainable agriculture  
through co-operation

*Robin Tunnicliffe*



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Volume 2, Issue 1



University  
of Victoria



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## Introduction

Southern Vancouver Island is an anomaly for Canada in terms of farm demographics. Financially viable organic farms of under 10 acres, run by women under the age of 40 are common (COABC, 2007). In the rest of Canada, the average farm size is 273 ha (600 acres), the average farmer is a 56 year-old male, and the average farm income is \$10,000 (NFU, 2005). Part of the reason for the different demographics has to do with the physical and economic climate of this region. The mild, Mediterranean-like temperatures allow for year round farm production. Culinary tourism fuels a booming restaurant industry committed to promoting local food. Another contributor to the demographic has been women-farmer role models who initiated marketing and information-sharing infrastructure in the organic growing community in the early 1990s. These women set up a community farmers' market for organic produce, they pioneered direct-sales to restaurants, they coordinated monthly farmer meetings with farm tours and speakers, they taught, and continue to teach organic farming business courses at the community college, and they set up a mentorship programme to train new farmers.

The culmination of these factors, along with the recent increase in market share for organic and local food, has created conditions to foster local food production. Significant barriers remain, including farmland in Saanich that sells for \$100,000 per acre and low food prices that undermine the farmer's ability to recapture the cost of production. Choosing agriculture as a career remains difficult because financing is not readily available, job security cannot be guaranteed, and farmers have to actively seek out training. As Canadian farmers retire, it is challenging to find youth to replace them.

The Victoria region, an epicentre in Canada for small organic farms that are directly marketing in their communities, may have answers on how to revitalize the agricultural sector and to encourage youth entrepreneurship in agriculture. What follows is a case study of three organic farms on the Saanich Peninsula, run by women under 40, who are making their living farming. A key to their success is their ability to work co-operatively together. Their co-operative enterprise is called Saanich Organics.

Saanich Organics works for three reasons. First, the owners are compatible and complementary, second, geographically they are close to each other and to a booming market, and third, their combined resources have en-

abled them to gain efficiencies of scale and to be resilient in a very insecure niche.

## What is Saanich Organics?

Saanich Organics is a co-operative vegetable marketing business. Farmers have run it since 1993 in order to sell their produce directly to residential customers, restaurants, and grocery stores in the Victoria area. It only sells certified organic produce, or produce that is in transition to organic, that is grown on Southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands.

The farms involved with Saanich Organics are all certified organic, small plot (1-3 acres), intensively farmed operations. (Please see Appendix A for a field map denoting scale, intensity, and diversity of production.) Each farm grows between 20-30 crops. All of the farms have greenhouses (between 20-160 ft. in length) to extend the season. The farmers use tractors and small rototillers to work the soil. Hand tools are used in the day to day seeding and maintenance of crops. All farmers use drip irrigation systems with some overhead watering. The farming season is 11 months of the year. Harvesting is possible 12 months, but the farmers chose to take January as a month of rest.

Produce from Saanich Organics is routed to three destinations. The “box program” sells vegetables directly to families via a set weekly assortment of vegetables valued at \$25. It is delivered once a week in a wooden crate to approximately 60 homes in Victoria. Restaurant and grocery sales are “picked to order” and are delivered to the 20 restaurant customers on one of two delivery days. Finally, excess produce is brought to the weekly farmers’ market.

## Who is Saanich Organics?

Saanich Organics is owned and run by three farmers: Rachel Fisher, Heather Stretch, and Robin Tunncliffe. It was started in 1993 by two farmers, Tina Baynes and Rebecca Jehn, who conceived of selling weekly boxes of vegetables to residential customers. Tina and Rebecca sold the business in 2002, and the new owners expanded to include sales to restaurants and grocery stores. The business is not a legal co-operative because the owners found the paperwork and process daunting, but it functions in essence like a growers’ co-operative.

All three farmers started their careers on leased land with no background in farming. They all had university degrees, similar environmental ethics, and a desire to do physical labour outside. They were driven to make their farming endeavors succeed but not at the expense of their values. (See Appendix B for grower profiles.)

The provincially regulated organic certification process requires that farms be in “transition to organic” for three years before they are “certified organic.”

## Why is Saanich Organics in Operation?

Before addressing the reason behind the business, it seems logical to address the reason behind the farming. All three owners of Saanich Organics had no background in agriculture and no formal farm training. Yet stubbornly, against the grain, they started their farms from bare pasture and never looked back. This life choice was a complicated synthesis of politics, practicality, and soul searching. It stemmed from a desire to have a light environmental footprint, a fear of having a desk job, and a search for a meaningful life balance. Since then, their passion for food production has broadened to notions of social justice through food security and the plight of farmers around the world. The timing was exactly right for their entry into the field. The market for their produce was just taking off, and the momentum behind the sustainable agriculture movement was captivating. Leaders in the organic movement had successfully deconstructed the hegemony of conventional agriculture and the multinational corporations that fuelled them. This left a lot of room for new farmers to re-create agriculture that suited their bioregions, their scale, their values, and their customers.

### *Heather:*

*I knew that I loved working outdoors and that I liked physical work. I sure didn't relish the idea of sitting behind a desk all day and then having to go to a gym to stay healthy. I wanted work that would involve both my body and my brain. I was also becoming increasingly aware of the basic connection between what I put into my body and how I felt, and food and cooking had long been interests of mine. I wanted to find work that could include a family so that my 'work life' and 'family life' wouldn't be separate categories. Coupled with all this was a desire to find work that would leave a small environmental footprint. I wanted work that would benefit my own health, as well as that of my*



“We used to wave as we passed each other on the highway driving into Victoria with small loads of produce, often to the same destinations.”  
– Robin



community and my planet. This seemed like a very tall order until I considered organic farming!

### **Robin:**

Something resonated within me about the rightness of being sufficient, which was contrary to over-consumption, corporatization, and being out of balance with nature. However, I think it was the time I spent traveling and working on farms in South America that really cemented the notion for me. I was heartened by the families working together on the land, I loved the tranquility of their lives, the fun of community, the practicality of growing one's own food, and the age old traditions of the farmers' market.

### **Rachel:**

I've often been asked why I have a farm and what drew me to it. My answers are true: I am drawn to work that is ecologically healthy, that involves my body and mind, that harkens toward sustainability and thoughtfulness rather than blind material consumption. But those answers never feel quite right, as though I'm missing something important. Now I know it's because I need to describe the sense of wholeness one feels being engaged in this work. That the small things, like hearing the clip clop of the neighbour's horse as she rides down the road while I cut salad greens in the fog, or the scent of basil as I brush past the plants in the waning heat of a summer evening, or the act of pulling a couple of bright orange carrots out of the ground and enjoying them with my son, are the real reasons why I am a farmer.

Where once farmers had to call in experts for advice, organic farmers were encouraged to use their common sense and to rely on their community. Where specialization was once a virtue, organic farmers delighted in diversity and the complexity of natural systems. Where physical labour had been seen as drudgery, organic farmers enjoyed the physical nature of the work, being outdoors, eating with the seasons, and feeling connected to the land. Where farmers had been seen in a derogatory light, organic farmers were emerging as heroes and being positively portrayed in the media. Times were changing; Heather, Rachel, and Robin were riding on the cusp. They were mentally engaged, physically exhausted, and sleep deprived, but they were grinning from ear to ear.

It wasn't all bliss by a long shot. Seven-day work weeks all summer, balancing farming with other jobs, crop losses and not enough infrastructure on the farm caused stress and despair. Possibly most strenuous was the desire to succeed above all else. The urge to save face was strong in light of all the

family members, friends, neighbours, and strangers who all said it couldn't be done. Financially it was impossible in the beginning. Robin didn't even keep records for the first two years of farming because she didn't want to know about all the money she wasn't making. Heather calculated her wage at about \$5/hr if she didn't include expenses.

## Co-operation as a Way of Farming

Saanich Organics' mission is to make its owners' farms financially viable by selling their high quality produce at top dollar directly to consumers. Forming their own distribution network has allowed the farmers to have more control over the market and over the prices they receive for their produce. Selling to a "for profit" distributor wouldn't allow them a viable return. Heather, Rachel, and Robin are able to delegate the chores of marketing and delivering. They have the option to free up their own time for farming, or they can opt to take on paid positions within the Saanich Organics structure. By cooperating they achieve greater efficiency, increased production, cost savings, and a better quality of life. By allowing other farmers to sell through their network, they are able to sustain their low mark-up and take on additional employees at a fair wage to further lighten their workload. (See Appendix C for financial structure.)

By working together, the farmers gained access to markets that they could not reach as single farms. While many chefs and produce managers are very interested in buying local organic produce, they have limited time to deal with farmers – especially small farmers who can only offer limited quantities. Buyers appreciate the service that Saanich Organics offers because they can access as many as 10 farms with a single call. Saanich Organics employees who do the sales are farmers and can offer first hand knowledge of the produce. They are dedicated to calling and delivering at set times each week. The reliability has given chefs the confidence to put some items on regular menus and this has led to a greater volume of sales.

The residential box delivery programme is made more efficient and less onerous by the co-operative structure. During seasonal peak times for paid administration work, the three owners share the tasks in order to allow the administrator maximum time in her field. By pooling resources, they were able to purchase a cell phone that allows the administrator to take calls in the field. Many of the residential customers are on the box program because they want contact with their farmer. The farmers appreciate this contact, but





“I used to spend two half days a week on marketing and delivering. Now I just call in what I have, and Heather sells pretty much everything I offer, and more!” – Rachel





it can be onerous to maintain during the busy growing season. Publishing a weekly newsletter is possible when marketing duties are shared. This results in a stronger farmer/customer connection and fosters a loyal customer base, which again, results in greater volume of sales.

The co-operative structure also works for information sharing and emotional support. Local expertise is still quite limited in terms of organic vegetable production. While the community is very supportive and open in sharing what they know, having an inner circle of colleagues who are skilled professionals is invaluable. While packing up produce, farmers will often share challenges or successes in the field and others will offer suggestions and advice. When one person has learned a new source of seed, or has tried a different technique, they will share with the group. This openness and desire for collective success is an important benefit of co-operation.

Heather, Rachel, and Robin are personally ambitious and are proud of successes at their own farms, but this is different from being competitive. There is plenty of ambition at Saanich Organics, and farmers delight in wowing each other during weekly deliveries, but there is a sincere interest in the well being of all other farmers in the community.

Farming can be very trying, and with high season comes long hours, seasonal variables, and stress on families as they try to cope with the workload. Mid-summer is especially hard, because in addition to the regular farming and harvesting schedule, the timing is tight to get winter crops in the ground to ensure fall and winter harvest. While not as frequent as in the early years, farmers can show up at delivery time in tears and near the end of their rope. Having an understanding support network so readily available has been a lifeline and a stabilizing force within the group. Both supporters and the supported change roles weekly, creating closeness and soliciting opportunities for emotional release and problem solving.

## How it Happened

Heather, Rachel, and Robin met each other through farming community gatherings and were all former suppliers of Saanich Organics under the previous owners. They had attended work parties together and were all vendors at the same farmers' market. The notion of working together had never occurred to them until Saanich Organics went up for sale. At that point, Saa-

nich Organics just did “the box programme,” the vegetable home delivery service to 20 families once per week.

Rachel was the driving force behind the purchase because she recognized the value of having control over the market as a distributor rather than just a contract grower. Robin was wary of taking on the tedium of administering the box program because she had seen first hand the many hours that Rebecca and Tina had spent on the ledgers and maintaining customer lists. Heather felt that working together would be more work than farming alone. However, when faced with the prospect of being at the mercy of middlemen, paperwork didn’t seem so bad.

The market for organic produce had increased by leaps and bounds in the seven years Tina and Rebecca had been running Saanich Organics. This gave the new owners more flexibility in re-structuring the business. First, they could add a reasonable mark up to the produce without fear of losing customers. Second, they didn’t have to compete with each other for precious restaurant contracts because they recognized that the market was now big enough for all the produce they could grow.

The first decision they made was to hire an administrator and a delivery person. One of the major problems that plagued Tina and Rebecca was lack of produce to sell, especially in low season. Delegating marketing and delivering meant the farmers could spend more time on the land. During high season, each additional hour spent in the field can translate into substantial increases in production. Timing is everything in farming. Output from the farms in Saanich Organics has increased by as much as 75% since they purchased the business. While most of this increase is due to having more experience as growers, co-operation is also a significant factor.

When Heather’s husband, Lamont, was approached at the market by a chef looking for produce, he approached the group with the notion of collectively supplying a restaurant. Since they all met weekly with their harvests for the box program, it wasn’t a big leap to harvest extra produce for a restaurant. Soon, all the growers were “sharing” their restaurant contracts with the group as they recognized it was truly a win-win situation. It was less pressure for the farmers to come through each week for the chefs, and the chefs enjoyed the greater selection and reliability.

Being able to count on regular large-volume demand changed the way Saanich Organics farmers worked. Rather than farming tiny patches of assorted



“Building relationships with the chefs has been really gratifying over the years. They get really excited about our crops, and they are interested to know all I can tell them about each variety.” – Heather



crops, they were able to think in terms of their 100 ft. beds. Where they used to wait for each beet or carrot to be sold before they replanted a new patch, they could now clear out entire beds of crops as soon as they were ready and optimize succession planting to ensure they made the most of the growing season. The larger volume of produce sold meant greater returns and the ability to hire staff. Having extra hands on the farm gave the farmers another quantum leap in terms of their ability to maximize production within the confines of the season.

The aim of the box program is to get fresh produce directly to customers with minimal packaging and effort on their part and to provide a stable demand and income for farmers. Customers get 6-10 produce items in their box, worth a value of \$25. (See Appendix D for a sample newsletter.)

This method of sales was inspired by Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects but doesn't fit the classic model because Saanich Organics allows for flexible payment schedules and they charge customers for what they receive rather than having to share the whole harvest. Saanich Organics doesn't operate as a CSA for two reasons: flexibility and finances.

A classic CSA is a set contract with obligations between customers and farmers. Customers must pay ahead and commit to taking boxes every week. Farmers must divide their field contents amongst their shareholders. Stability is not as important for Saanich Organics farmers because they are buoyed by the tremendous demand for their produce. Box customers tend to travel, to grow their own gardens, and to want to experiment for short periods with new food. Farmers want the freedom to grow many crops in many quantities, not all of which are suitable for box customers. For example, pea shoots are delicious garnishes for restaurants and are quite lucrative in small patches. Allotting field space to crops like this is a smart financial strategy. Salsify, quinoa, and okra are not on your average family's menu, but all Saanich Organics farmers like to experiment with some different crops every year in the hope of finding a winner.

The 3-part marketing format really rewards experimentation because chefs are very willing to buy out-of-the ordinary items at high prices, and then farmer's market and box customers benefit from the proven winners that are grown in larger quantities the following year. Having different markets really fosters and rewards diversity, whereas, the classic CSA format fosters stability.

The box program has grown in popularity over the years. It used to be a big challenge to get a customer to sign-up up for a weekly box of seasonal vegetables. Cost, inability to chose what goes in the box, and unfamiliarity with cooking vegetables were all barriers to selling the box program. Now there is a 75-person wait-list for the program that has been growing over the last year and a half.

As news of the environmental and social benefits of eating local builds, so does the interest for the food. While the customer base used to be more transient as people tried out the box for novelty, customers are now staying on the program longer. Currently there are approximately 60 customers on the box program.

The box program requires more administration and labour per unit of produce sold, but it is considered “bread and butter” because it is a consistent market for a large volume of produce. Chefs are fickle, and produce managers are irregular, but the box customers are a dependable counterbalance to the rest of the business. The box planning is done during the restaurant sales. Heather can read weekly trends in restaurant purchasing early in her calls and direct the produce accordingly so that everything gets sold.

There is a wildcard element in selling to the artistic whims of chefs; some weeks Japanese turnips sell immediately, other weeks it’s the snap peas that are appealing. Box customers get all the same produce that is offered to the restaurants, except for really expensive items like specialty carrots and pea shoots that aren’t good value for families, but they don’t get to choose when they get it. This flexibility makes it worthwhile to spend time individually bunching and packing box items, versus the bulk sales to restaurants. The boxes are put together on Monday nights. They are delivered the next morning along with the restaurant and grocery store orders.

## The Commercial Division

The name “Commercial Division” started as a joke because it was a single wax box that went to a restaurant. Little did they know what was to come: 20 restaurants, a contract with a major grocery store chain, and weekly sales. There is a group of chefs in this region called the Island Chef Collaborative (ICC) who are very supportive of farmers because they believe in the value of local production. They are also trying to build the culinary tourism trend that is happening on Southern Vancouver Island and in the Cowichan





“You hear that you aren’t supposed to go into business with your friends. We end up spending so much time together, and making so many life decisions together, that I can’t imagine being able to do business with anybody but my close friends.” – Heather



Valley. The chefs feature local producers on their menus, give out grants to new farmers, and swap sources of good supply. It is for this reason that the Saanich Organics list of restaurant contacts continues to grow.

Dealing with restaurants is a boon and a curse. The boon is that creative chefs can often use unusual items in small amounts. They will also buy in bulk, so the farmer doesn't have to bunch and weigh individual items, and they can often accommodate last minute items and over harvests. The drawback is they can be inconsistent, and they quit and change restaurants frequently. Saanich Organics farmers have buffered themselves from this shock by taking on a roster of 20 or more restaurants. There is a pecking order, big spending chefs get the first call, and therefore, access to more items, but sales are balanced to keep everyone happy. It is important to keep many customers on the list to deal with fluctuations in volume.

(For the nuts and bolts of how the Commercial Division works, please see Appendix E.)

## Long John: The Greenhouse

The main challenge all Saanich Organics farmers faced was building their farms to the point of financial sustainability. A related challenge was having enough selection of desirable crops, especially winter crops, to keep clients interested in regular winter delivery. The collective purchase of a 160 ft. x 20 ft. greenhouse was an attempt at solving these two problems.

The greenhouse was erected on Heather's land. The long thin structure quickly earned the nickname "Long John," and a farmer's persona. When referring to the collectively managed area, the name "Long John" stuck (or "LJ" for short). The first year, the three Saanich Organics owners farmed LJ themselves, with a moderate degree of success. One major problem was that none of them were able to pay the same degree of attention to the crops as they did to their own farms, and as a result, problems went unchecked and resulted in lower yields. An example of this was that the filters on the irrigation system weren't cleaned often enough and the water coverage was inadequate, leading to poor crop performance. Small errors are costly, and this was enough to convince them that they couldn't do it on their own.

Heather, Rachel, and Robin had gotten their farming systems efficient enough to confidently pay themselves \$10-\$15 per hour for their time,

depending on the crops. Thus, they felt they could pay staff \$10/hr to run a plot that was co-managed. In order to warrant a greenhouse manager's time, they decided to farm an additional plot adjacent to the greenhouse. This was dedicated to winter crops that were always desperately needed for the box program through the low season.

Managing staff at LJ has been a huge learning experience. Interviewing, managing, budgeting, and nurturing staff has made them refine systems to their most efficient and to put their heads together to strategize. They have been really fortunate to have such amazing, motivated, and independent staff, especially their greenhouse manager Melanie. There were a few rollercoaster years where debt was carried into August from wages and inputs, and the wisdom of this expansion was questioned, but come September they had a modest profit and an abundance of crops for the winter. The LJ area has been steadily expanding for four years.

## The Moss Street Market

Moss Street Market is a community market that takes place every Saturday from April to November in the school grounds of an affluent neighbourhood in Victoria. The farmers had all attended the market as individual vendors. It was an important start in their resource sharing when they began taking turns going to the farmer's market.

Attending the farmers' market is a mixed blessing. It provides the highest return for labour and provides a valuable chance to interact with customers and other farmers. On the downside, preparing for market is an onerous task, and attending weekly is a large time commitment and output of energy. The solution was to team up and share the market table. Each farmer attends the market every third week, bringing all the produce from all three farms. Certainly this makes market day more complicated but it is a win-win situation all around.

Over the years, the volume of customers at the market has increased by 10-fold and the sales by about 20-fold. It used to be that the market was barely worthwhile when time and effort were factored in. It now accounts for a greater volume of sales than the box program. During peak season the farmers deliver between two and three pickup truckloads to the market for the 4-hour sale. There are three people behind the stand and often an extra person out front re-stocking the rapidly disappearing produce. There have



been days, especially during strawberry season, when the line-up has been 30 people long.

## What Makes Saanich Organics Work?

### *Personal Compatibility*

Their ability to work together and to share a vision for the future is the main reason that Saanich Organics works for Heather, Rachel, and Robin. They share the dream of making a living from farming. When two of the Saanich Organics owners attended a workshop on business management, they learned a classification tool from the business sector which divides people into 4 personality types: analytics, drivers, expressives, and amiables (Colbourne, 2005). According to this schematic, a functional business requires all four types. The owners of Saanich Organics identified themselves as three of the four personality profiles and found each of them contained elements of the fourth. This explained why they work so well together.

Rachel is an analytic. She is very logical and she takes the time to understand all the elements that contribute to a problem. She believes it is important to do things right, and she is emotionally reserved until decisions are made. Heather is a driver. She is practical, efficient, and task-oriented. When she has a vision, she can see the steps that need to be taken and can delegate so that everyone feels involved and inspired. Robin is an expressive. She is an ideas-generator and has energy for expansion and change. She enjoys setting the course and then looking to the others for guidance on how to make it happen. All three women have components of the amiable character-type. They are relationship oriented, empathetic, and able to see other viewpoints.

Another factor in their compatibility is their stage of life. They met when they were struggling to make their new businesses happen. They recognized that their quality of life would increase by working together. Heather and Rachel dreamed of having children and they were looking for ways to farm with a family. They were all looking for quality of life out of farming and were open to change. They all had a similar desire for financial stability but were content to follow a cautious growth strategy. Eight years later, they have matured together and still share a similar outlook.

## *Location*

Another factor in the success of Saanich Organics is its physical location. Geographically it is located in a wealthy and progressive area that also experiences a high volume of tourism. Chef customers are interested in participating in the culinary tourism movement. Residential customers are drawn to the produce for a variety of values: environmental, health, and ethics. The farms also experience a mild climate, which is conducive to year-round growing and the ability to produce diverse crops.

More specifically, the home of Saanich Organics, at Northbrook Farm in the Mount Newton Valley on the Saanich Peninsula, is a reason for the success. Heather and Lamont's generosity with their 10-acre property and their home has allowed Saanich Organics to grow in a secure and sheltered environment. Access to land is a major issue for new farmers in the region. Being able to build a greenhouse and to invest in irrigation and soil amendments, where it was possible to bank the return on the investment, has been a boon. Having a garage that serves as a box packing facility, that Saanich Organics occupies rent-free, has meant the opportunity for stable growth.

Having opened up 2 acres of an adjacent hay field to serve as a farm for former apprentices, and for an employee to farm for her own business, Northbrook continues to expand, diversify, and serve as an incubator for new farmers. This environment has encouraged the flow of ideas among farmers of all experience levels and has provided opportunities for beginning farmers to work as paid labour on Saanich Organics area or in Heather's field. Northbrook also leases a plot to Robin and her partner Andrew, which gives them the opportunity for greater stability, and a plot to Rebecca, former Saanich Organics owner, to focus on seed saving. All together, there are seven separate farming businesses on Northbrook Farm.

## *Sharing Resources*

Once they teamed up, Heather, Rachel, and Robin found they had more money to invest collectively and more time to spend growing food. The more money they made, the more they were able to invest in small machinery, better facilities, and extra staff. By investing together, they also shared the security of distributing the risk. The net effect of their teamwork is a higher quality of life, something that they had all sought in farming but had lost in the bustle of trying to make it work.



“When we get together, whether we’re packing boxes, having a work party, reviewing spreadsheets or just brainstorming, the kids get to be together and they have so much fun. It feels really satisfying to work with my son.” – Rachel





“I feel lucky to share my life work with Rachel, Heather and their children. Having friends that live the same way I do – who work all the time and love it, who live for food from the garden and who thrive on the same values and politics – makes farming that much more rich.” – Robin





The purchase of “Long John” greenhouse is a good example of how collective investment pays off. Each farmer invested \$1500 in purchasing the greenhouse, and now the yearly returns to each farmer in profit is roughly the same as the initial investment. Another example is an investment of \$7500 in fencing at Northbrook. By pooling money they were able to buy high quality fencing that will last for a long time and save them time and money over the longer term.

In the beginning, the three Saanich Organics farmers shared a single staff member who did a weekly rotation on each of their farms. This staffing experiment enabled the farmers to experience the benefits of an employee first hand. It was initially too much for any of them to consider an employee, but after a season of sharing a person’s wage, they were each ready to take the plunge and hire staff of their own, in addition to collectively hiring.

Another type of resource they share is time and skills. They take turns at the farmer’s market selling produce, so that the other two farmers are free. More often than not, the farmers will come to the market on their off-week and either help behind the table, or take time out to observe customer behaviour, traffic patterns, and other vendors’ tables. Rachel is good at carpentry, Heather was a professional cook in a past career, and Robin enjoys public speaking. Each of these skills, and a host of others, are resources that each brings to the partnership.

## Conclusion

Saanich Organics is a model for successful co-operative sustainable agriculture. Personal compatibility, geographical location, and shared resources are all key components to how Saanich Organics has been able to prosper as a co-operative business. Organic farming is a re-balancing of agriculture with the benefit of traditional knowledge and modern technology. In this context, there has been ample opportunity for re-creating farming to suit environmental ethics and local sensibilities. The farmers of Saanich Organics have had the freedom to create a business within this new framework that builds on their values, their goals, and their vision of the future. In essence they are selling food that offers a connection to a cultural ideal of agriculture.

Co-operating has enabled the farmers to share a large component of their farming businesses - the direct marketing of produce. Competing in a glob-

al market is made easier by organic certification and by selling through local venues like restaurants and farmers' markets. However, most important in a competitive market place is the ability to differentiate one's products. Heather, Rachel, and Robin cannot compete with price but they can compete with their story. The brand "Saanich Organics" enables them to get more mileage from their story than they could as individuals. Their brand has been successful because their vision is gathering more support.

The story is not over. Farming continues to challenge Heather, Rachel, and Robin. Some days, farming is so tough, so discouraging that Heather has felt it is unethical to encourage anyone to farm. While Saanich Organics is building momentum, it is still on the fringe and remains a product of dogged determination. Fortunately, there is a growing army of doggedly determined citizens who remain committed to regenerative agriculture. There is strength in numbers. It is the hope of the Saanich Organics growers that those people inclined to farm will be able to learn from this co-operative endeavour and will consider banding together to tackle the challenges of farming in a globalized world.

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# Appendix A – Sample Newsletter



November 4, 2007

Bramalea Apples	Rutabaga
Broccoli Shoots	Delicata Squash
Carrots	Salad Greens
Mei Qing Choi	

## Rutabaga Slaw

From the kitchen of Heather, the Rutabaga Maestra.

1 large rutabaga, peeled and grated  
a generous splash of lemon juice  
olive oil, salt and pepper

Grate the rutabaga in a bowl. Toss with lemon, olive oil, salt and pepper and serve.

## Delicata Squash

This squash, grown by Rachel Fisher, has a delicate moist flesh that is light in colour and texture. Cut in half and roast at 400° F for 30 minutes or until tender. You can eat the skin and all! It is so sweet and moist that it needs very little accompaniment.

## News from the Farm

BC Assessment has changed the criteria for small farms and has issued 185 notices of withdrawal for farm tax status on the Saanich Peninsula, with 200 more in the mail. Now assessment refers to the size of land parcels, not the amount earned off the land. This is a true assault on small plot farmers who are contributing to our food system, our social fabric, and to our environment. Tax breaks are a small price to pay for keeping land in agriculture regardless of scale. Economists who draft these policies just don't understand how threatened our agriculture is, and that food won't always come from elsewhere.

The excavator was at the farm this week putting drainage around the wettest part of Northbrook farm. It is truly amazing how field drainage helps to prevent soggy areas. The result is healthier plant roots, less disease build up, and greater top soil retention.

As the season gets soggy, it gets harder for us to predict if veggies are holding up well in the box, ie root veggies that are discolored inside, greens with frost damage, etc. Please, please let us know if you get produce that is substandard and we'll top up your box with extras next time!

## Mei Qing Choi Salad

dressing:

- 2 tbsp sugar
- 3 tbsp soy sauce
- 1/2 tsp curry powder
- 3 tbsp cider vinegar
- 2tsp peanut butter
- 1/4 tsp red chili pepper flakes

salad:

- 1 (3oz) package ramen noodles (discard flavour packet)
- 1/4 c dry roasted peanuts
- 3c. thinly sliced pac choi (or any other choi)
- 1c. thinly sliced red pepper
- 1/2c shredded carrot
- 1/4c. diagonally cut green onions.

Whisk together dressing ingredients, toss it all together immediately before serving (or reserve some carrot, green onion, and peanuts for garnish)

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## Appendix B – Map of Feisty Field

### *Spring-Early Summer 2006*

#### GREEN HOUSE

SALAD GREENS IN PRODUCTION FOR 10 MONTHS 1500 SQ. FT @ \$6 PER SQ.FT

GARLIC IN GROUND FOR 9 MONTHS 900SQ.FT @\$2.30 PER SQ. FT

STRAWBERRIES IN GROUND FOR 2 YEARS 900 SQ. FT @ \$3.10 PER SQ.FT

POTATOES IN GROUND FOR 4 MONTHS 600SQ. FT @ \$1.16 PER SQ.FT

PAC CHOI IN GROUND FOR 2 MONTHS 3000 SQ. FT @ \$2.8 PER SQ.FT

PEAS IN GROUND FOR 4 MONTHS 300 SQ. FT @ \$1.20 PER SQ.FT

LETTUCE, SUCCESSIONS CYCLING FOR 5 MONTHS 900SQ. FT @ \$ 4PER SQ.FT

JAPANESE TURNIPS SUCCESSIONS IN GROUND FOR 6 MONTHS 300 SQ. FT @ \$2.50 PER SQ.FT

BEETS, RED ACE, SUCCESSIONS IN GROUND FOR 6 MONTHS 600 SQ. FT @ \$4.25 PER SQ.FT

LEEEKS IN GROUND FOR 5-9 MONTHS, NOT HARVESTED UNTIL FALL

CARROTS IN GROUND FOR 3 MONTHS 900 SQ. FT @ \$5.40 PER SQ.FT

RED TURNIPS IN GROUND FOR 2 MONTHS 300 SQ. FT @ \$2.50 PER SQ.FT

SALAD GREENS, SUCCESSIONS IN GROUND FOR 5 MONTHS 1200 SQ. FT @ \$4 PER SQ.FT

FAILED CUTTING LETTUCE 600 SQ. FT @ \$0.40 PER SQ.FT

SWISS CHARD 600 SQ. FT @ \$1.20 PER SQ.FT

ARUGULA IN GROUND FOR 4 MONTHS 750 SQ. FT @ \$4 PER SQ.FT

LETTUCE IN GROUND FOR 4 MONTHS 150 SQ. FT @ \$4 PER SQ.FT

SALSIFY IN GROUND FOR 6 MONTHS, NOT HARVESTED UNTIL FROST

CELERIAC IN GROUND FOR 5-8 MONTHS, NOT HARVESTED UNTIL FALL

CUCUMBERS IN SMALL COLDFRAME FOR 3 MONTHS 300 SQ. FT @ \$2 PER SQ. FT

WINTER SQUASH IN GROUND FOR 7 MONTHS 900 SQ. FT , NOT HARVESTED UNTIL FALL



## Summer-Late Fall 2006

### GREEN HOUSE

SALAD GREENS IN PRODUCTION FOR 10 MONTHS 1500 SQ. FT @ \$6 PER SQ. FT

CARROT IN GROUND FOR 5 MONTHS 900 SQ. FT @ \$5.40 PER SQ. FT

STRAWBERRIES IN GROUND FOR 2 YEARS 900 SQ. FT

OVERWINTERING ONIONS IN GROUND FOR 9 MONTHS 900 SQ. FT @ \$2.30 PER SQ. FT

LETTUCE, SUCCESSIONS CYCLING FOR 5 MONTHS 900 SQ. FT @ \$4 PER SQ. FT

JAPANESE TURNIPS, SUCCESSIONS IN GROUND FOR 6 MONTHS 300 SQ. FT

BEETS, RED ACE, SUCCESSIONS IN GROUND FOR 6 MONTHS 300 SQ. FT

LEEEKS, IN GROUND FOR 5-9 MONTHS 600 SQ. FT @ \$4.50 PER SQ. FT

PURPLE TOP TURNIPS IN GROUND FOR 3 MONTHS 900 SQ. FT @ \$2.80 PER SQ. FT

SALAD GREENS, SUCCESSIONS IN GROUND FOR 5 MONTHS 1200 SQ. FT @ \$4 PER SQ. FT

ARUGULA IN GROUND FOR 3 MONTHS 600 SQ. FT @ \$4.00 PER SQ. FT

BASIL IN GROUND FOR 3 MONTHS 300 SQ. FT @ \$3.30 PER SQ. FT

SWISS CHARD 600 SQ. FT

KALE IN GROUND FOR 12 MONTHS 600 SQ. FT

ARUGULA IN GROUND FOR 4 MONTHS 750 SQ. FT

LETTUCE IN GROUND FOR 4 MONTHS 150 SQ. FT

SALSIFY IN GROUND FOR 6 MONTHS 200 SQ. FT @ \$4.20 PER SQ. FT

CELERIAC IN GROUND FOR 5-8 MONTHS 900 SQ. FT @ \$5.20 PER SQ. FT

SALAD GREENS IN SMALL COLDFRAME FOR 3 MONTHS 300 SQ. FT @ \$4.00 PER SQ. FT

WINTER SQUASH IN GROUND FOR 7 MONTHS 900 SQ. FT @ \$1.20 PER SQ. FT

## Appendix C – Grower Profiles

### *Rachel Fisher*

Environmental activist, minimalist, and dreamer are all adjectives that described Rachel when she first started her farming apprenticeship at ALM farm in Sooke. She spent her weekends helping save the old growth in the Wallbran Valley while learning farming and seed saving. She farmed for ten years on leased land until she partnered with family to buy an 8-acre homestead where she has been farming for the past two years and living with her life partner Grant and four year old son, Elias. She currently has 1.5 acres under production, an innovative moveable greenhouse, a small orchard, and a large area devoted to annual crops. Rachel's role within Saanich Organics has been to oversee the greenhouse and collectively farmed area. Her sense of aesthetics is apparent in all marketing materials and outreach documents, and her financial savvy has been invaluable to shaping the structure of the business.

### *Heather Stretch*

After graduating with an MA in Post Colonial English Literature, Heather was called back to her family's 10 acre land to try her hand at farming. She and her husband Lamont dove in with no experience and after eight years-Northbrook Farm is a thriving model of co-operative land use. Heather and Lamont are currently farming part-time, and the farm has seven separate farm-businesses currently operating on the property. Heather is a mother of three, and is devoted to raising her children in a farming environment. Heather's role within Saanich Organics as the administrator is to coordinate sales and act as the main contact. Heather's capacities to organize the business structure and to put ideas into action have resulted in the solid infrastructure of the business.

### *Robin Tunncliffe*

Robin came into farming with romantic notions from farming stints in South America from reading books on back-to-the-land living and permaculture. After completing a three-month apprenticeship with one of the founders of Saanich Organics in 1998, she leased land nearby and started on her own. She transformed an acre horse pasture into a productive farm. Her partner, Andrew, joined her four years ago and now they both farm full-time. When Andrew joined, the pair decided to take a 1/3 acre plot at Northbrook for

extra income. Robin is pursuing an MA at the University of Victoria; researching local agriculture during the off-season. Robin's role in Saanich Organics is networking and outreach. Robin writes the weekly newsletter and represents the business at public functions. She is an ideas-generator and propels the business forward by imagining bigger incarnations.

## Appendix D – The Nuts and Bolts of Commercial Sales

During high season (May through October) the commercial division has two sales weekly: Tuesdays and Fridays. For the Tuesday sales, farmers call-in with their list of offerings on Friday. For the Friday sales, farmers call-in on Tuesday. When making an offering, the farmer goes out to the field and estimates the contents of the field that is ready for harvest, and most importantly, what they physically have time to harvest in the 48 hours prior to the sale. Heather or Chrystal, the administrators, compile the offerings into a spreadsheet. They call the restaurants in a pecking order with the biggest buyers having first access to the full list of offerings. As items are sold out, the list dwindles. Administrators often “oversell” the farmers by selling more than they offered, balancing customer satisfaction with overworking the farmer. Often the farmers are happy to be oversold because it gives them more flexibility with their harvests. When estimating field contents, it is safer to underestimate so that no one will be disappointed, but when oversold, the farmer can choose with a clear conscience whether or not to fill the order.

Once the sales are complete, the administrator will divide up the sales as fairly as possible between farmers. If one farmer has offered very few items that didn't all sell, he or she will be given a greater proportion of the total sold than others in order to make it worthwhile to deliver. Owners are not given preference in terms of sales. Once the sales are divided up, the administrator calls each farmer with their “list.” The list itemizes each crop with the amounts going to each restaurant, grocery store, or to the box program.

The farmer harvests, washes, and bunches the produce as required and delivers it to the “boxing room” (Heather's garage) by 4 pm Monday or 10 am Friday so that the orders can be packed in time for delivery. Clipboards, each one with a restaurant's invoice, are placed around the room. When a farmer arrives, he or she will start a box from a pile of used waxed boxes, and label

it according to its destination. Once the specified item is packed, the farmer checks it off on the invoice with his or her initials. Once the box packing is done, the boxes are numbered (1 of 4, 2 of 4, etc.) to ensure Tim, the delivery person, can track each box when it's packed up in his delivery van.

Before the day is done, farmers check their invoices with the master list so that changes can be made and totals re-calculated. Saanich Organics core growers are paid once a month, but occasional suppliers are paid each time they deliver.

## Appendix E – Financial Structure of Saanich Organics

The owners of Saanich Organics maintain a maximum mark-up on all produce of 15% to ensure a fair return to the farmers. While there is a set price list for produce, farmers are encouraged to name their price if they feel their produce is worth more. The more adjectives and qualities they can use to describe their produce the better, as it helps Heather sell items to the local chefs. If the item is unusual and desirable, Saanich Organics will often forgo the mark-up recognizing that these types of offerings add value to the business. Also, when there is a glut of produce, Heather will sell the produce at an agreed-upon “basement price” in order to encourage greater volumes of purchase.

**Wages:** For the past 4 years, the starting wage has been \$10/hr. The minimum wage in BC is \$8/hr. Returning employees are offered \$12 to \$15 per hour depending on the position. Owners all work within the Saanich Organics structure doing sales, management, and communications for \$15/hr.



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BCICS is delighted to publish a new series of Occasional Papers through New Rochdale Press. These scholarly papers, written by students, faculty, and individual reserachers provide a forum for promoting the field of Co-operative Studies. The papers reflect the diversity of sectors and uses for which the co-op model has been adapted and demonstrate the rich array of topics and interests that may be pursued within the field of Co-operative Studies.

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Based at the University of Victoria, the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies (BCICS) is a catalyst for research, learning, and teaching about co-operative thought and practice. We seek to understand how the co-operative model functions within different communities and economic contexts to empower people to meet their economic and social needs.

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Southern Vancouver Island is blessed with a rich resource of agricultural land; farming however, is a threatened activity because of the increased demands of a growing population and inadequate support through public policy. Nevertheless, there is an enthusiastic mix of small and organic farmers in the region whose efforts to steward the land have been welcomed by local residents and promoted through culinary tourism.

The story of Saanich Organics provides a look at the co-operative efforts of three female farmers as they work to establish a thriving, small-scale agricultural enterprise. As a co-operative vegetable marketing business, Saanich Organics demonstrates the efforts, innovation, creativity, and values that form the bases of many formal co-operatives. Their story highlights patterns of co-operation that are indigenous to many parts of the world and demonstrates the benefits that follow from collaborative efforts.

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Cover photo: Robin, Rachel and Heather (left to right)

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