

Veteran Organic Farmers Make Transitioning Look Easy

Jonathan and Carolyn Olson¹

Take Home Message: “Don’t Be Afraid to Do Something Different!”



Organic wheat fields at Olson farm (left). Olson family (center). Organic grain bin on Olson farm (right).

Veteran farmers Jonathan and Carolyn Olson make organic production look easy. They started with a conventionally managed 300-acre farm in Southwestern Minnesota and now manage more than 1,100 acres of certified land. They love what they do and have become leaders in the organic community.

Getting Started. The Olson’s decision to go organic began with a comment from their buyer in 1997. “My dad and I had been growing seed and food grade soybeans for a couple of years,” recalls Jonathan, “when our buyer said to us, ‘You should be growing organic – it pays more.’” The Olson’s didn’t know any organic growers at the time, so they did a lot of homework before making the transition. “We started out by going to Lamberton [Experiment Station]. We asked a lot of questions; tried to learn as much as we could,” recalls Jonathan. “Going to events and conferences, we started to build contacts and have conversations with organic growers.”

The Olsons gave organics a try by putting 40 acres from one of their cleanest fields into transition during spring of 1998. “The first couple of years seemed easy,” says Jonathan. But, over time, weeds have begun to build in almost every field and the Olsons have had to experiment with management strategies that include altering planting dates, increasing mechanical and hand cultivation, and flaming. Despite continuing struggles with weeds, the Olsons say that they’ve never lost money. “At worst, we’ve broken even with fields that occasionally were really ugly,” says Carolyn.

¹ This profile was prepared for the Tools for Transition (TFT) project - a four-year research and education effort funded by the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture¹. Transition scholarships are available for Minnesota field crop and dairy farmers participating in the Farm Business Management Program. The Olson’s are TFT participants. Contact Meg Moynihan for scholarship information: 651-201-6616 or meg.moynihan@state.mn.us.

During the past 15 years, Jonathan and Carolyn gradually have transitioned 1,100 acres (much of the land is rented on long-term lease from family members). Throughout the transition, they maintained what's known as a "split operation" with some ground under organic and some under conventional management. "We worked really hard to clean out equipment, clean off dirt, flush it for seed," says Jonathan. Under National Organic Program rules, split operations must thoroughly clean all equipment before using it to work organic fields. This removes contaminated seed and/or residues left behind from conventional crops. The Olsons also keep meticulous records and invested in enough bins to allow for simultaneous storage of organic, transitional, and conventional crops.

Early in the process, full certification became a goal of the Olsons and all their land is certified now. Reflecting on their transition strategy, the Olsons note important benefits associated with having run a split operation. Most important, they say, was the chance to learn while growing the farm business. "Gradually transitioning smaller acreages allowed us to learn," says Jonathan. "Fifteen years later, we're still learning. And just about the time you think it's getting easier, you do something like plant tillage radish in front of soybeans," he says with a smile.

The decision to gradually transition also provided the Olsons greater access to capital. "As long as we were transitioning gradually, organics wasn't a problem with our lender," explains Jonathan. "Our banker smiled when he saw the first organic prices and, over time, thought it made sense."

Farming Organically. Today the Olsons are busy almost full-time from mid-May, when planting begins, to November after harvest wraps up. Their three-year rotation includes corn, soybeans and, in year three, small grains followed by a cover crop. Fertility comes from the Olsons' 2,400-head conventional hog finishing enterprise, which Johnathan and Carolyn have managed since before going organic. Their organic corn yields regularly equal or exceed conventional county averages while their organic soybeans yield slightly below conventional averages.

Jonathan enjoys marketing and contracts sales nationally to buyers of organic seed, feed, and soybeans. During transition, he regularly earned premiums of up to \$1.00 for GMO-free soybeans, though he says this can take a lot of calling around. "But I don't mind doing it," Jonathan says. "I like this aspect of marketing - the homework."

With consistently good yields and premiums earned for organic crops, the Olsons are reaching their long-term goal of fully paying down farm debt. "Financially, the last couple of years have been very rewarding," says Jonathan.

Challenges. When asked about their biggest challenge, Jonathan retorts "besides weeds?" That's when Carolyn jumps in suggesting that the community reaction has been difficult to deal with at times. "We get a lot of comments," says Carolyn. "Everything from 'You're pretty brave' to 'Your dad never had weeds in that field.'" But, she says, it just takes educating folks about what they are trying to achieve.

“Carolyn started a blog (Carolyn CAREs – Committed to Agriculture While Respecting the Earth, carolyncares.wordpress.com) and we both posted on Facebook after planting the tillage radish” says Jonathan, explaining that they were inundated with questions from passers-by.

Due in part to questions from neighboring farmers, the Olsons have become very active in their community, advocating on behalf of organic farming and working to educate others interested in transitioning. Carolyn serves as President of their county Farm Bureau and is a member of the Minnesota Organic Advisory Task Force. Carolyn and Jonathan both volunteer regularly with the Future Farmers of America and speak to farming organizations. The Olsons’ dedication to organic farming and commitment to education has, in fact, earned them the well-deserved nomination for 2013 Organic Farmers of the Year from the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services.