Seed saving plan will reduce dependence on big seed companies

by DAVID SCHMIDT

CHILLIWACK – One of the biggest problems facing small, local farmers is not weather or weeds, it is access to seeds.

Seed security and seed saving, particularly of heritage varieties suited to local conditions, has been a recurring topic at recent Certified Organic Associations of BC conferences, and has become a major focus at Farm Folk/City Folk.

For the past few years, FF/CF has been working with the University of BC Centre for Sustainable Food Systems and farmers in the Fraser Valley and on Vancouver Island on a seed trials and seed-saving project. While most of the farmers are small organic growers, the group also includes two large conventional vegetable growers: Wisbey Veggies in Abbotsford and Lazo Tyee Farm in Comox.

“It’s been interesting working with both organic and conventional growers,” says FF/CF seed security project manager Chris Thoreau. He notes that while they may use different approaches, “they all face some of the same challenges.” Those include loss of preferred varieties and, particularly for organic growers, disease resistance.

Not certified organic

Dan Oostenbrink of Local Harvest Farm/Market (LHF/M) is one of the farmers in the project. Although not certified organic, he follows organic principles on his 30-acre intensive vegetable farm in Chilliwack. He began his project a year ago with some Golden Tomahawk beet seed he was able to obtain.

“The idea is to develop locally adaptive seed,” Oostenbrink says. “We’re working towards the ability to become autonomous so we’re not dependent on the big seed companies.”

Saving seed is not simple. Oostenbrink planted his seeds in July 2015 and harvested the beets last fall. Each was assessed for its characteristics.

“We looked for large disease-free beets with bright orange colour, good strong tops and few root hairs,” he explains. About 1,500 beets met the criteria. They were stored overwinter, then planted this spring. Since beets are biennials, they only produce seed in the second year. On August 11, FF/CF held a “pop-up” field day. Half a dozen people showed up to help Oostenbrink, Thoreau and UBC post-doctoral research fellow Alex Lyon harvest the seed. After it is collected, the seed will be dried and threshed “to see what we get.” Some will be used to grow a fall beet crop, some sold to other local farmers and some used in Lyon’s research.

Support local seeds

“The aim of the project is to support local seed production,” Lyon says, adding she hopes her research will help growers determine the best varieties for local conditions.

“Dan is kind of a case study for us as to what it’s like to grow a seed crop at this scale,” she says, noting another project goal is to “scale up” seed production in BC. Oostenbrink started the project “just because,” but linked up with FF/CF and UBC to access the volunteer labour, funding and connections they could provide.

While Thoreau and Lyons are focused on the project, it is just a sideline for Oostenbrink. He has bigger problems to deal with, having spent over a year fighting first with the City of Chilliwack and more recently with the Agricultural Land Commission.

LHF/M was a featured stop on the 2014 Chilliwack Agricultural Tour, as the Chilliwack Agricultural Commission showcased it as a model of intensive vegetable production and locally-focused marketing.

The market was housed in a barn at the front of the farm. Helped by its strategic location...
Brewing giant taps Chilliwack hops, water for new facility

by PETER MITHAM

CHILLIWACK – Brewing giant Molson Coors Canada is moving to the easternmost corner of BC’s hop revival with its decision to construct a new brewery, serving western Canada on a 36-acre parcel in Chilliwack.

The massive new facility adjacent to the Trans Canada Highway at the Vedder Road overpass was formally announced on August 4, though plans have been moving through city approval processes throughout the summer.

All requirements met

“Chilliwack met all of our requirements to build a new brewery in British Columbia,” Stéphane Oostenbrink, president and CEO of Molson Coors Canada said in a statement.

While the availability of land and highway access was a key logistical factor, Glendinning specifically praised the availability of ingredients brewers need as being a draw, too.

“Our brewers are delighted with the quality of water in Chilliwack, a key ingredient to producing our great beers and ciders,” Glendinning said.

While the Molson Coors plant is locating on a former agricultural property above the East Chilliwack aquifer, it will source its water from the Sardis-Vedder aquifer that has its origins south of the city.

The limited capacity of the Sardis-Vedder aquifer hasn’t stopped Molson Coors from being welcomed with open arms.

While the city updated its bylaws earlier this year to bar large companies from bottling and exporting the aquifer’s water, Molson Coors will draw just 5% of the city’s peak drinking water requirements and add value to it in the process.

Healthy aquifer

“City of Chilliwack has a healthy aquifer, it is a great source of high quality water that will be able to meet the supply needs of the community and Molson’s new brewery,” Alex McMillan told Country Life in BC on behalf of the company.

However, Molson Coors was quieter about being closer to the local hops it uses in its beer.

Chilliwack hop grower Chris Sartori was heralded with reviving the Lower Mainland hop business when he launched his hop yard in the Columbia Valley near Lindell Beach a decade ago.

Today, his hops flavour batches of Molson Export and have found their way into the work of Molson Coors’ craft beer subsidiary, Granville Island Brewing.

Molson Coors will be the third brewer in the community when it opens in 2019, and by far the largest. The first phase will be approximately 230,000 square feet, with a second phase that could boost the total footprint to more than 460,000 square feet.

Job opportunities

“The new Molson Coors Canada brewery will be one of the largest private-sector projects to come to Chilliwack and will encourage further economic development and job opportunities in our community,” Chilliwack mayor Sharon Gaetz said in the statement accompanying the announcement.

The arrival of Molson Coors follows on this spring’s expansion of long-time local craft brewer Old Yale Brewing Co. to a 6,550-square-foot facility on South Sumas Road, and this summer’s launch of Chaos & Solace by a former partner in Old Yale.

Molson Coors Canada intends to move their iconic brewery from Vancouver to this former farmland kitty corner to Cottonwood Mall in Chilliwack.

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