

## Raising Organic Livestock with Sally Bernard, Barnyard Organic

If you're going to pursue organic production, you must understand the business side as well as believing in the philosophy.

Biggest obstacle to raising organic livestock = the cost of feed. (Pigs, chickens)

- **Cost of organic grain**

- **Where to source organic grain (Only two places: Ontario, Co Op Mill) unless you can find a local farmer and put together your own feed. Barnyard Organics produces organic feed, based on custom rations, on a smaller scale.**

Look for an alternative protein other than soybeans and corn. *Peas* are a good example.

There are lots of resources to help you! Books, Google, and nutritionists to name a few. Don't be afraid to use livestock nutritionists-very helpful, valuable info.

Examples (from books at the back):

If possible, assemble and grind up the feed yourself, you'll know what's in it and can make it so that it meets your animals nutritional needs.

When sourcing minerals make sure you get the mineral that's right for your animal. Don't feed a chicken minerals that are meant for a cow. Some minerals can kill animals if used incorrectly.

Diatomaceous Earth (DE) is very important! Internal, external parasites, general condition. Offer free choice or incorporate into feed. Chickens will dust in it, cows will roll their heads in it, lambs will eat it, etc.

Probiotics are great and come in mineral premixes from Bio Ag- a company producing non-GMO supplements. Important to use after any treatment, but also regularly in a stressful time (lambing, transition to new farm, etc.).

Pasture is your most valuable source of feed. Grain is really important, but grass is more important for ruminants. Take care of it as much as you can. If you plan a pasture you're light-years ahead of just throwing them onto a random field. Cut down on grain if done correctly.

It's important to know what you're producing for. Cater the diet to what sort of production you're doing. Sheep raised for wool production don't need to be fat, but slaughter sheep need a higher protein level!

If you're running out of time to renovate your pasture (till and re-seed), or can't stand to spend a year on it, you can frost seed clover on the pasture as that is usually used up first and can help extend pasture life temporarily.

## *Specifics:*

**Meat-kings:** Chickens buy as day old. Live in brooder (smaller, heated area-with a heat lamp) for 3 weeks. After 4 weeks and they are released outside into cages (chicken tractors). It's important to have air circulation and land access. Chickens eat quite a bit of grass contrary to popular belief, and they leave behind a lot of manure, a valuable source of organic matter to build soil fertility.

50 chickens / pen. "Gross" birds, just want to eat and poop. *Put laying hens in the pens, it keeps the meatkings moving and more active, legs don't give out.* Move them twice a day.

**Dealing with Predators:** added wire mesh, electric wire around the bottom of the coop.

*Nightguard* – little cassette tape shaped object with red light solar powered that dispels predators by blinking all night.

Conventional: Chickens last 6-8 weeks,

Organic Chickens at Barnyard Organics: 10-12 weeks. Pastured chickens offer a big difference in taste.

**Sheep:** "You cannot raise sheep organic because of parasites" on conventional farms they are de wormed 2+ times a year. Can't let them eat where they poop – bad for parasites. The more they move the less parasite problems. Move them to a new location once a week, then any parasite won't recycle itself. Back out next year.

No hosts for the parasites +a (hopefully) harsh winter hopefully kills them off. As opposed to not moving them at all and de-worming. At birth, don't do anything. Sheep are born with really long tails, and they are docked (tail falls off due to elastic). Leave the tails on now and it doesn't affect anything. They don't do any vaccinations anymore (ensure lots of mineral supplements that include sufficient amounts of selenium to both ewes and lambs). Provide a mineral high in selenium instead of giving shots.

Dorsets: nice smaller and maternal breed with no horns, but take longer to size up, Consider cross breeding.

**Pigs: Breed:** Berkshire. They tear up soil, but don't eat very much grass. Big deep straw packet as opposed to grass works and doesn't destroy your soil.

**Dairy Cow:** DE, self-sufficient. Key considerations for cattle = clean bedding, good air circulation. They poop a lot, which thus contributes as a soil fertility source. Flies love cows. Number one preventative: cleanliness.

**Laying Hens:** Everyone in the universe should have one. They're funny to look at, and easy to deal with. They graze around over 500 acres, and come inside by their own accord. Don't eat a lot, great use of grass, control earwig population.

**Heritage Breeds:** Laying hens heritage hens are beautiful, and their survival instincts are strong. They lay pretty eggs, though production isn't quite as productive as commercial birds. You need to educate

customers to sell heritage breed products, and it requires a customer base, committed to these ideals. Heritage hens are not as happy in a chicken tractor.

**Why do we have livestock?** We believe in diversity on a farm, and like to see and create the cycle of feed / manure / livestock.= Fertility of soil!

**Why Organic?** Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOS)/genetically engineered foods are terrifying. Soybeans are a big part of feed ratio and are one of the largest with potential for GM contamination. The Canadian Organic Standard is the only standard to ensure non-GMO soybeans. Access to outdoors makes sense. They have a small customer base that support organic livestock, so it makes sense.

**Marketing:** Making sure that you have the market first, when producing organic livestock. Most people will buy a carrot, **not as many people want to buy a lamb chop.**

People who care a lot to go organic.

As a farmer, you have to convince them

A) They want Lamb

B) They want organic Lamb. What's your model going to be?

Important considerations:

It's hard to hit a farmer's market temporarily, customers feel like they have to get to know you. You need to maintain face to face contact. Short term connections are great, but **won't lead to long-term connections.** Restaurants are great, but **require consistency in quantity, quality and delivery.** It's good to find a chef that understands the inevitable realities of farming that can affect the consistency of the product (weed/disease pressure/crop failures, etc).

Organics is a whole relationship thing. You need to accept that you'll be putting in significant effort to sell this stuff—it's a growing market, but still marginal compared to conventional agriculture!

People also don't typically have much freezer room, so therefore are not commonly prepared to handle a lot of good meat at once.

The cost of production is just as important in livestock production, as veggies / grain production.

Figure out how much you need to make per animal / per pound. The labour cost always needs to be included! You're worth at least 20\$/hour – (imagine it as if you're working an office job). Include time that you wouldn't think to include (i.e. market time/communications—whenever you're not in the field). **Don't sell yourself short.** Your time may be the biggest expense, and the hardest thing to nail down.

There are so many good resources out there from different organizations / books. Read stuff you think even doesn't apply to you (ie.a book for conventional ag will still undoubtedly hold something for you.)

**Challenges of Organic Livestock Production:**

*The Emotional connection:* Selling sheep that you've had for years.

**\*If you're gonna have livestock, you're gonna have deadstock.** Prepare for this.

It's not a carrot, it's a sheep. Learn to do your own necropsies – they're otherwise quite expensive.

*Learn to trust your instincts:* The body of knowledge out there is conventionally oriented, so it's up to you!

*Lack of facilities:* If the infrastructure is just not there (butcher, wholesaler) go watch and help. Creates the assurance that they're doing a good quality job. You don't want to ruin a product that you've invested a lot of time into, so ensure things are top quality and well managed every step of the way.

*Not getting away:* Animals are inside in the winter, so there are no breaks during the winter, as they require regular attention and management. It's a large time investment, where you can't take time away.

*Make sure you're making money*

*Certified organic veggies vendors aren't necessarily certified for livestock-make sure they aren't advertising as such, unless the certification papers are proven and available.*

**Rewards:** Farm tours and seeing kids making the connection to their food on the farm is so satisfying. The life lessons that come with the birth, life and death of an animal can't be gained elsewhere. So lucky to have such a tangible connection to the food: "**who are we having for supper?**" as opposed to "what are we having for supper?"

Response to a question regarding the order to get livestock to raise: Laying hens, then meat bird (sell to anyone), consider market first. Pigs then beef (easier to sell than lamb) but lambs are easier to deal with than cows. Toss up between last two. It all depends on your markets and comfort with certain species.