

WISCONSIN'S ORGANIC VEGETABLE FARMS: A SNAPSHOT

Organic vegetable farms in Wisconsin are as diverse and eclectic as a box of produce from a Community Supported Agriculture farm. They run the gamut from small market gardens growing a wide variety of vegetables to larger farms growing a few crops for processing. They serve a wide-ranging marketplace, from farmers' markets to retail stores.

In order to better understand what these farms have in common, as well as how they differ, in February 2011 a research team headed by Erin Silva at UW-Madison mailed a survey to all certified organic vegetable farms in Wisconsin. The survey asked questions about farm size, mechanization, employees, markets, finances and life satisfaction. One hundred thirteen of the 222 surveys that were mailed were returned.

Here is the picture of Wisconsin's organic vegetable farms that emerged from the survey:

Farm size: Wisconsin's organic vegetable farms tend to be small. Over half of the farmers responding to the survey plant five or fewer acres each year. Seventy-five percent plant fewer than 12 acres.

Irrigation: Six out of every 10 farms responding to the survey use drip irrigation. About half of the farms use garden hoses and sprinklers. Thirteen percent use aluminum pipe sprinklers, five percent use water cannons and nine percent use other irrigation systems.

Season extension: Using technology to produce vegetables before or after the regular growing season can increase farm profits. Nearly every farmer responding to this survey—92 percent—has a greenhouse, and 55 percent use a high tunnel to extend the growing season.

Mechanization: Most farmers responding to this survey depend on at least some human-powered technology, which is no surprise given the small acreages they farm. More than two-thirds—69 percent—use hand seeders to plant their crops, and 72 percent rely on wheel hoes or other hand cultivation for weed control. Almost half use a walk-behind rototiller. Almost three-quarters of the responding farms use tractors. Of these, 57 percent use a tractor-mounted rototiller and 49 percent use a mechanical cultivator and/or transplanter. A third or fewer of the responding farms use tractor-mounted or -pulled seeders or tractor-assisted harvesters.

Postharvest handling: Wash tubs are the only postharvest equipment found on most responding farms, with 84 percent using wash tubs to clean produce after harvest. Slightly more than half of the farms have a cooler and/or an enclosed packing shed. Fewer than half of the farms have a brush washer, a barrel washer or other postharvest equipment.





Finances: Organic vegetable farms tend to be financially self-sufficient. Forty percent of the responding farms operate solely on farm-generated income, with no off-farm income. Of the farms with non-farm employment, about half derive 50 percent or less of their income from an off-farm job. More than two-thirds—69 percent—are self-financed and do not depend on outside loans for capitalization.

Land ownership: Seventy-one percent of the survey respondents said that they own the land they farm, with only six percent owning none of the land they cultivate. About 30 percent owe no payments on their farmed land.

Employees: The survey showed that a typical Wisconsin organic vegetable farm employs two full-time and one part-time, year-round workers. Some farms hire up to 20 employees. In addition, the surveyed farms employ three to five seasonal workers. Twenty-six percent of these farms hire a manager. The survey did not ask farmers to distinguish between paid employees and volunteers exchanging their labor for a share of the farm's produce.

Life satisfaction: Despite long hours of physical labor, organic vegetable farmers tend to find their work satisfying. About three-quarters of the surveyed farmers are satisfied or very satisfied with their quality of life. Only five percent are dissatisfied with their quality of life, and fewer than one-quarter are dissatisfied with their farm profitability.

These results provide a snapshot of the many ways Wisconsin's organic vegetable farms contribute to the vitality of the state's agricultural community. With diverse production approaches, secure land ownership and high levels of satisfaction, organic vegetable farmers positively impact the strength and vitality of Wisconsin's agricultural landscape.