

Organic Science Cluster II

Partners in Organic Innovation: A Conversation with USC Canada's Jane Rabinowicz & Helen Jensen

USC Canada is partnering with Dr. Martin Entz and colleagues on Organic Science Cluster II Research [Activity A.1](#): Participatory plant breeding and seed production approaches for Canadian organic crop production. For more information on this project, please visit <http://www.dal.ca/oacc> or read our interview with [Dr. Entz](#). Jane Rabinowicz is the Director and Helen Jensen is Quebec's Regional Program Coordinator for The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security.

Can you give a brief overview of USC Canada?

[USC Canada](#) (www.usc-canada.org) is one of Canada's oldest international cooperation organizations – we were founded by Lotta Hitschmanova in 1945. About a decade ago, USC took a look at its mission and decided to modify it to focus exclusively on ecological agriculture and building resilience in farming communities, more specifically on seed. The notion is that seed system resilience is the basis of food system resilience, which is also the foundation for a healthy, thriving community.

The organization is based in Ottawa and works in eleven countries around the world. The most recent country that we've started doing field programming in is Canada – we were always based here, but we never had a Canadian field program. Three years ago we launched [The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security](#) (www.seedsecurity.ca), which is a field program in Canada inspired by our work overseas.

How did USC Canada become involved in Organic Science Cluster II (OSCII) and how did you help to shape the research?

When The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security was launched, we wanted to lend our support to research that was already underway rather than start up our own national research program. Our strategy was to hit the ground running and build some successes and momentum that would then translate into the work being continued for many years. It also allowed us to leverage our financial resources through OSCII.

We have a background in Participatory Plant Breeding (PPB) overseas, so there was a natural fit with the work Martin [Entz] is doing. Further, we're interested in crops and varieties that have a contribution to food security, that can be feasibly grown for seed in Canada, and that



have market potential. Those three criteria were really well met by Martin's program.

The research shifts a bit each year. We wanted to make sure that the program was really participatory, in that the farmers had a significant say in the direction of the program. So, in the first year we organized a national consultation to make sure we were identifying parental materials and crosses that were meeting the specific yet diverse needs of the farmers. After a year, we were talking more about learning, our core hypotheses, and our fundamental research questions beyond just getting a lot of materials out there and seeing what they do.

The regional coordinators for the Bauta program bring really good feedback from the farmers about potential selections and training needs. Farmers know what they want and are natural researchers, and can often select by instinct, but many of them expressed a desire to know how breeders select. This feedback then shapes the learning resources that are developed. We've also helped to make sure we and our partners are finding good opportunities to present this work – both to raise the profile of the program and to make sure we're engaged in the broader dialogue about PPB.

This year, we're doing a survey on intellectual property, to learn how producers feel about different options for commercializing these materials. There are some complexities around the registration process, and how to approach benefit sharing of the materials developed through the program, assuming that the research is successful, which is what the progress so far is indicating.

How are you participating and contributing to Organic Science Cluster II?

We are contributing from a number of different angles and directions on the research activity, the original link being that USC Canada has been doing participatory research in the ten countries we work in abroad for several decades.

Program delivery, research design, and financial support are the three main categories of our involvement. This brings some complexities, but this participatory program is a three way partnership between the researchers, the civil society partner, which is USC Canada, and the growers. It's a really interesting model, and so far it is working very well.

From a program delivery point of view, we're involved in the research in the field, communications and outreach, trouble shooting, and providing a lot of the ongoing support and training. The Bauta team provides local on-the-ground support to growers and to the research team at the University of Manitoba, who are now tasked with rolling out a PPB program that has a national reach with four different crops, and getting them into all the different regions – not just doing cereals on the Prairies, but also in Atlantic Canada or British Columbia. We're also expanding out of grains, including organic carrot seed production work in British Columbia.

We are able to bring the program to the different regions because we have a team of people on the ground embedded within local organic institutions that have networks and relationships with local farmers. We play a liaison role between producers and researchers that facilitates the exchange of information. We also make the program bilingual – a lot of the farmers, even if they understand English, aren't that keen on being heavily involved in a program that is not operating in French. It's an extra effort for them, and it's less accessible.

We also interact with the research team, from hosting Anne [Kirk] and Martin when they visit, to periodic discussions of the core research questions and the direction of the program. Helen has a strong background in plant genetic resources, and has done participatory research overseas, so she worked with the University of Manitoba team on the research design.

What excites you the most about the research?

We love the farmer-civil society-researcher model. There is amazing learning happening across the board, beginning within our own team. It's also amazing to see the participation, learning and the contributions of the

growers, and to see the exchanges get more meaningful each year. At first, when the farmers signed on, it was a general desire to pitch in. After a few years, they start seeing the materials change under their selection, and become a lot more enthusiastic.

PPB is relatively new for North America and Europe, so the trailblazing that we're doing is really exciting. It is lovely to see the results, to see that there are great things coming from participatory research, and research in organic systems. These all fit with the values of the type of farming communities and production systems that USC Canada wants to support. It feels like we're at the beginning of something that is truly very exciting.

How do you think this research will impact your work, as well as other organic growers?

The fact that we are doing on the ground research in Canada and that our staff is actively involved in the research is kind of new for us, because we're much closer to the actual applied research than we can be in our international projects. There's a lot of learning that comes from that. Hopefully the research will develop materials that will be useful for organic farmers and impact the broader community. And, we hope that through our Canadian work we can shed light on the important work our overseas partners are doing. Many of these groups are years ahead of us, and their efforts need to be recognized.

We hope this research will provide inspiration and incentive for other participatory research programs in Canada. We no longer want to be the only participatory research program in the country, specifically focused on organic production. If we look ahead to the future, the next step would be institutionalizing participatory organic research across the country – to be successful, we need to see broad acceptance and engagement in this type of work. We're working towards good peer reviewed papers, to establish the credibility of participatory research. The more we can show this type of work as viable research that leads to good results, the more other programs may be successful, whether they're working directly with us or in parallel, and more likely it is that we'll all be successful down the road.

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