



Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

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MEDIA RELEASE

Keep it covered, green and growing is Soil Champion's motto

February 20, 2018

For immediate release

By Lilian Schaer, for the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

For Dan Breen, soil is a living, active bio-system that needs protecting. It's like the "skin" of the earth, he believes, and much like people cover their bare skin when going outside in the winter, fields too need covering to protect them from the elements.

The third generation Middlesex County dairy farmer, who farms with his wife, daughter and son-in-law near Putnam, has been named the 2018 Soil Champion by the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA). The award is handed out annually to recognize leaders in sustainable soil management.

Breen had just bought the 100-acre family farm from his parents in late 1989 when he faced a major decision: replace the operation's worn-out tillage equipment or come up with a different strategy.

A chance encounter introduced him to an emerging new cropping system—and in spring 1990, Breen made his first attempt at no-till, planting 40 acres of corn with a used two-row planter he'd modified. He's been gradually growing his farming business ever since, today farming 300 owned and 500 rented acres.

"I treat the rented acres like the ones I own and that's crucial. It's all about stewardship so whether you own or rent, you have the responsibility to do the best things you can," he says. "Nature is in balance and we mess up that balance with excessive tillage, taking out too many nutrients, or not providing biodiversity, so we need to provide a stable environment as we go about our farming practices."

His typical rotation involves corn, soybeans, wheat, and cover crops, which he started planting 12 years ago. About 100 acres are rotated through alfalfa and manure is spread between crops when favourable soil and weather conditions allow.

"The only acreage that doesn't have year-round living and growing crop is grain corn ground. I try to keep everything green and growing all the time and never have bare ground," he says, following the motto, keep it covered, keep it green, keep it growing.

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According to Breen, no single activity will result in healthy soil and there's no set recipe for farmers to follow due to the variability of soil type, topography and climate. Instead, it's important to consider what crop is being grown, what it needs, and what the nutrient levels and biological activity of the soil are.

“A true no-till system is more than just not tilling, it is biodiversity, water retention, and nutrient cycling,” he says. “When I first started no-till, it was just to eliminate tillage, now it is to build a whole nutrient system—cover crops weren't even on the radar when I started farming.”

One of the pillars of his soil success over the years has been a willingness to try new things—as long as they support the goal of building stronger, more stable soil—and adapting to what a growing season brings.

To other farmers considering a switch to no-till, Breen recommends perseverance to keep going when success looks doubtful, strength to resist naysayers, and starting the transition gradually, such as with no-till soybeans after corn, and then no-till wheat after soybeans.

“It's a considerable honour and it's humbling to win this award. It's not something I was looking to achieve—I do what I do because I love it,” he says. “As a farmer, I've had an opportunity to be a caretaker of this land, but I only have tenure for a blip in history. I hope I leave it in better shape than when I found it—and I hope my daughter and son-in-law will do the same thing.”

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For a full-length version of this profile and more information about the Soil Champion award, including how to nominate someone, please contact Andrew Graham, 519-826-4216, agraham@ontariosoilcrop.org or visit www.ontariosoilcrop.org.