

Organics make a comeback

Natural farming research at UNL helps lower costs

By Andy Jacobitz
Staff Reporter

With the recent trend among consumers toward "natural" foods and the need for many farm producers to reduce production costs, many farmers have become interested in returning to an organic style of farming.

The NU Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources is in the forefront of organic farming experimentation, said Dr. Warren Sah's of the UNL Department of Agronomy.

Sah's has been working with an institute experiment on organic farming. He said, however, that as researchers they call it "alternative agriculture" instead of organic farming because the term organic farming carries many negative connotations.

Whatever the term used, this type of farming is described by the United States Department of Agriculture as a production system that avoids or largely excludes the use of synthetically compounded fertilizers, pesticides and growth regulators. It relies on crop rotations, crop residues, animal manures, mechanical cultivation and aspects

of biological pest control. The purpose is to maintain soil productivity, to supply necessary plant nutrients and to control insects, weeds and other pests.

Sah's said the experiment began in 1975 and was prompted by a concern for environmental food safety and water safety. The experiment is funded by federal Cooperative State Regional Research Funds and has recently been approved for another five years.

Sah's said that in the 1930s and '40s, crops were grown on a rotation basis with different crops grown in different years. When anhydrous ammonia came into use as a fertilizer, continuous cropping became popular because the needed nutrients in the soil could be replaced with synthetic fertilizer.

Now many farm producers are looking at alternative farming as an opportunity to lower costs. Sah's said alternative agriculture eliminates the cost of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. He said that alternative agriculture is a form of soil conservation and is better for groundwater. He also said that some people just can't work with chemicals because of physical reactions to them.

Researchers using dry-land test plots compared conventional continuous corn to a four-year rotational system of corn, soybeans, corn and oats and clover. The organic treatment made use of feedlot

manure only. The only weed control was cultivation, whereas the conventional corn plot made use of all synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides commonly used by producers.

Sah's said that the results varied in the test years. In years of drought and stress, such as 1980, 1983 and 1984, the manure rotation plot outyielded the conventional plot. In years of good rainfall, such as 1981 and 1982, the conventional plot did better. He also said that many differences could be noted in soil profiles. More nutrients and organic material accumulated in the soil of the organic plot, creating a better overall soil profile, but the changes were slow and gradual, he said.

Sah's said that economically, organic farming can compete with conventional farming if a producer does not have to pay for the manure used. The gross return may not be as high as is conventional farming, but the net return is. All economic comparisons were based on regular market prices. Some organic producers, however, do receive bonuses for their products.

Sah's said that indirectly, many farmers are becoming interested in alternative farming. It provides less costs and fits well with many current farming operations, and with the recent decline in farm commodity prices, more producers may consider this alternative, he said.

Boosalis doesn't support state lottery

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Other states in our area are not getting the return they expected, she said, only about 48 cents on the dollar.

Also Nebraska isn't big enough to support a lottery and organized crime usually follows, she said.

About her philosophy of government, Boosalis said she believes people should be a part of the decisions that affect their lives.

"Government is the people," she said, "and we should encourage them to do as much as possible for themselves."

Regarding the death penalty, Boosalis said it should be used as an option in the most vicious crimes.

Commenting on President Reagan's impending visit to Omaha to campaign for Kay Orr, Boosalis said it will bring a lot of money to Orr's campaign.

Boosalis emphasized her leadership skills were demonstrated during her

eight years as mayor of Lincoln.

During that time, she said she kept a lid on taxes and people paid a lower proportion of their incomes when she left office than they did when she went into office.

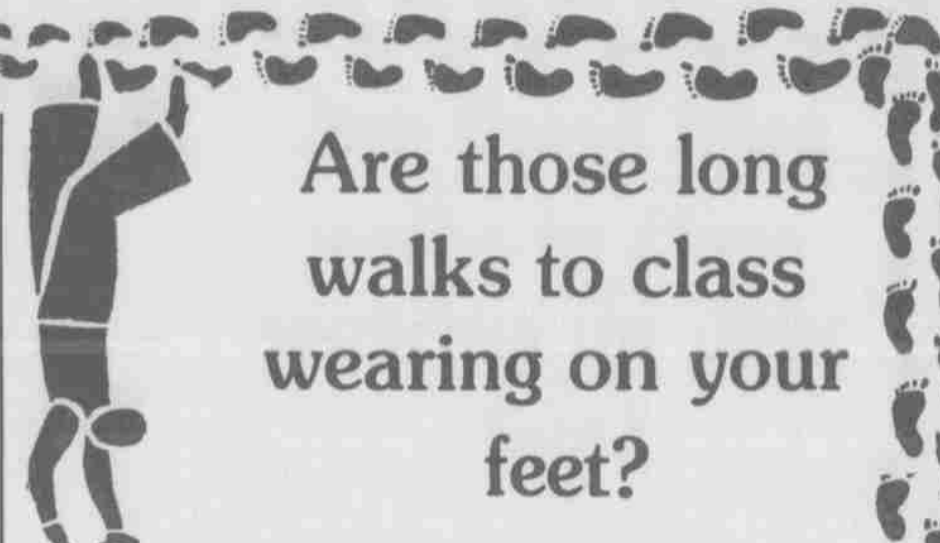
"Because I did it for the city of Lincoln I can do it for Nebraska," she said.

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