

Lifelong passion for soil defines Soil Champion Award recipient

By Lilian Schaer

It was a high school agriculture program taught by a former provincial department of agriculture employee that first awakened Anne Verhallen's interest in soil.

And when she wasn't sure what she wanted to do after high school, it was a university soils course that set her firmly on her eventual career path – a lifelong passion for soil that has earned her the 2019 Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) Soil Champion Award.

The award is handed out annually by the organization to recognize leaders in sustainable soil management.

"Extension and soils was what turned me on. While I liked the research, I really enjoyed hitting the road and being out with farmers," says Verhallen, who today is Soil Management Specialist for Horticulture Crops with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA).

After graduating from the University of Guelph, she worked for a crop consulting company before joining the provincial agriculture ministry in the late 1980s to deliver the Land Stewardship Program in Essex and Kent Counties.

It was there she met two fellow ministry employees, Leslie Huffman and Ed Tomecek, whom she credits with introducing her to local farmers and getting her into Michigan to see what growers there were doing with innovative soil management practices.

"That was instrumental to get me started, seeing what sand and muck growers in the state closest to us were doing with wind strips and no-till," she says. "I had pictures and things I could bring to farmers here and that got me off to a good start."

In the early years, erosion control and no-till were big focus areas, she says, but even then the topic of soil health was an emerging one.

And although there is more data on soil health today than ever before, the basic precepts of cover crops, rotation, organic amendments and reducing tillage still serve as the foundation of good soil management principles. For Verhallen, the challenge lies with keeping those themes new, exciting and fresh for the farmers she works with.

"Technology has made it possible to do things we've never dreamed of doing before," she said, citing the equipment available today to make no-till work for farmers. "Today, precision ag and GPS let you be very precise on where you are in the field. Before, it was totally based on how straight farmers could drive and guess their gaps."

The landscape has also changed significantly. What used to be a few smaller fields has become one big field; cattle pastures and laneways through the fields have disappeared and farm equipment has grown

in tandem with the field size. That has led to more compaction issues than were seen in the past, presenting a new soil health challenge.

For Verhallen, the best change she's seen over her career is a growing awareness of soil health and management across the farming community and a subtle change away from conventional plowing.

"You have to be open to change and actively seeking it, and it's thrilling to watch that happen with growers as they all have their different a-ha moments and rethink how to manage their farms," she says, adding that YouTube videos and podcasts give growers many new learning opportunities than in the past.

Her list of accomplishments is lengthy, but Verhallen is quick to point out that anything she's worked on has happened as part of a team or group that she participated in. Fellow OMAFRA Soil Management Specialist (field crops) Adam Hayes is a particularly frequent partner in projects and field work, on the road, and when planning and attending events.

There's no doubt of the value of her contributions, though, and they continue to resonate across the industry today.

Seeing wind strips as a common practice in tomato production in Essex and Kent is a thrill for her, and she's proud to be the only person still on the board of the hugely popular Southwest Ag Conference who was part of the original group behind launching the event 25 years ago.

More recently, she helped get the "Soil your undies" campaign off the ground as part of her passion for extension and ongoing efforts to help people visualize soil.

"Those are the kinds of things that bring soil and what's in the soil alive," she said. "Trying to understand what's going on and visualizing it, that's what turns me on."

There are many people who work on soil health, and for Verhallen, it's the growers who are really the soil champions, especially those who open up their farms to others to show and share what they're doing.

"I've had the best job. I've been able to work with researchers and farmers – the best day for me is to be out on the farm soil sampling and talking to farmers," she says.

Verhallen was one of two individuals who received the 2019 Soil Champion Award at the OSCIA Annual Conference in Kingston in February, selected in the research/extension specialist category. The other recipient was Jim Denys, who was recognized in the producer category.

*OSCIA Soil Champion 2019 profile – Anne Verhallen full length profile
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The selection panel was very pleased to exercise their ability to present Soil Champion awards to each of these outstanding soil health advocates. Nominations for the 2020 Soil Champion can be submitted any time up to November 1, 2019. Visit ontariosoilcrop.org to learn more.

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