

# Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

# SOIL CHAMPION

## “Parking the plow” the biggest impact on soil health, says Soil Champion



Photo Credit: Margaret May, Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association.

**N**ick Stokman's journey to being named the 2023 Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) Soil Champion began more than 35 years ago. That's when the Strathroy-area egg farmer became manager of the Strathmere Lodge Farm for the Middlesex Soil and Crop Improvement Association, sparking a life-long interest in no-till crops.

“That was a sand farm where soil erosion was a problem, so we went straight no-till. Many said that no-till was easy on sand, but would it work on clay, like my home farm?”

recalls Stokman. “So that was a challenge – and I went no-till. Parking the plow had the greatest impact on soil health and was the greatest change I've made on my farm.”

To Stokman, soil health means soil that is alive and resilient with plenty of below-ground biological activity. He works on achieving that with a rotation of corn, identity preserved soybeans, hard red winter wheat and cover crops on his Brantford Clay loam. His go-to cover crops are a single cut red clover seeded into wheat, with oats and peas if the clover doesn't take, and cereal rye into or after corn.

No-tilling soybeans into corn stubble hasn't been an issue, nor has no-tilling wheat into soybean stubble. His challenge has been corn going into wheat stubble and cover crop, especially on the clay soils.

“There has been no primary tillage here for 30 years, and it's still a long, slow process with no instant rewards,” he says, adding he's also tried strip-till, but that technique didn't provide a sufficient return on his program.

Currently, he's working to establish bio-strips through an On-Farm Applied Research and Monitoring (ONFARM) project to simulate tillage with cover crops after wheat and is also experimenting with 60-inch corn. His first year of single 60” rows resulted in a major yield hit as only about a third of the plants had double cobs.

In 2022, he switched to twin 60-inch rows, and although the yields of the 60 and 30-inch rows were much closer, overall yield was impacted by a lack of rain – only 43 mm fell from the second week of June to the end of July.

Regardless of the results, Stokman's enthusiasm for trying new things never wanes and research has played a key role throughout his farming career, with outcomes widely and regularly shared across the industry. And despite the slow progress, Stokman knows his soil is more resilient, with better drainage than conventional till, and his yields are competitive.

“Our society is geared for quick rewards and improving soil is the exact opposite,” he says. “So don't give up if the results are disappointing. Connect with other farmers doing similar things. If we can help each other and improve things at the same time, that's the way to go.”

He credits much of his success over the years to connections he made through organizations like Middlesex Soil and Crop and the many mentors and researchers he's had the opportunity to work with.

“You need an attitude that you'll make it work and that might involve changing things but so be it,” he says. “I tend to rather fly under the radar and let my plot data do the talking, but I'm really humbled and honoured to be given this award.”

The Soil Champion Award is awarded annually to recognize strong soil advocates. Nominations for the 2024 award can be submitted to OSCIA any time up to November 1, 2023. Visit [ontariosoilcrop.org](http://ontariosoilcrop.org) to learn more.

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