

## ***Have I Got a Product for You!***

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How many times have you heard that one? When I first became involved in organic I was instructed that one of the basic philosophies of organic was that organic farmers should be more reliant on inputs that they could supply from their own farm. One of the challenges of transition is that farmers are used to applying purchased inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, etc) to their fields and when they go to organic they feel they still have to buy something. This is sometimes referred to as the substitution approach of replacing the old input with another input that is allowed in organic. The challenge is to understand the farm system and to design your cropping or livestock system to avoid/minimize problems and not to need these inputs.

Along comes the salesperson who has the magic product. It is so good that it will do all these things and it is approved for use in organic. How do you know if the product they are selling is any good? For many of these products there is no government or unbiased source of information where you can look it up. Here are some tips on how to review the product **before** you make a decision to purchase:

- **Ask questions.** Find out the name of the product, the manufacturer, who is selling it and what is in the product. Sometimes the product literature does not include the name of the company on product information or testimonial sheets. That is a tip off that the company does not want to stand behind the product. If they will not tell you what the active ingredients are in it, watch out!
- Look up the product name or company name on the internet using Google or your favourite search engine. Usually there are a lot of links to testimonials or sales dealers. Look for a link to a product MSDS sheet. This will give you some details on the hazards of the product and it will identify the ingredients. If it tells you the product is 99% water, then that will tell you something about what is in the product. Also look to see if there are any links to non-biased research on the product and its proven usefulness (or not).
- Once you have an **understanding** of what is in the product and what it supposedly does; does that information make sense. Don't let them snow you with meaningless details to confuse you into buying it.
- Do you have a **need** for the product? The organic standards require that before using a product you have a documented need for that product or input. You should not use products that are not needed.
- **Before** you use the product, make sure it is approved by your organic certification body.
- If the product they are selling is making claims that it controls or reduces pests such as insects, diseases, weeds, rodents, etc, it must be registered with Health Canada, Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA). As part of the review for that approval process they must prove that the product has effectiveness for the claims the company is making. The product will have a P.C.P number on the label to indicate it is registered. If it is not registered then maybe they cannot prove it is effective.

- All fertilizers and soil supplements in Canada are regulated by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). CFIA reviews fertilizers and supplements for product safety information, efficacy, and labelling. This includes a guaranteed analysis for fertilizer nutrient ingredients. The Fertilizers Act defines that a product solely derived from organic matter can be labelled as “organic,” and a product with at least 15% organic matter can be designated as “organic based.” This does not mean they are approved for use in organic production under organic standards. “Natural” products must be directly mined from mineral deposits and only subjected to physical processes such as crushing and drying. More information on the Fertilizers Act can be found at <http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/plaveg/fereng/ferengfse.shtml>
- Ask for **research** on your crop and from your region. Are there acquaintances of yours that have used it successfully.
- If they respond that it did not work well last year due to ... but now the product is new and improved ... be wary.
- Don't buy enough to do the whole farm. Buy a small amount and **try it** on a small area, perhaps a few acres in the middle of a larger field and compare, keep notes. Better yet try it in several fields or on several farms to get a better average of results. If you want help to set up a field trial let me know.
- Lastly and most importantly, **Will it pay!** The benefits of using the product should be more than the cost of the products including any application and other miscellaneous costs. If it will not pay, why bother.

There are a lot of questionable products and sales gimmicks out there. A lot of them are targeted at organic growers. Don't get caught, buy wisely.