

P. Ag.

THE ONTARIO AGROLOGIST

A conversation with Maria Derkacz, P.Ag., Research Scientist, Plant Nutrition & Soil Fertility, and co-owner of INPRAS Consulting, in Vineland, Ontario.

Tell us about your background as a research scientist in plant and soil science.

For over 20 years my work has focused on development and implementation of new agronomic methods to improve horticultural crop production and crop quality in the grape, tender fruit, stone fruit, strawberry, greenhouse vegetable and floriculture sector, as well as ornamental plants. I am most passionate about improving soil and plant health and soil sustainability. Over a decade of working experience with OMAFRA and the University of Guelph made me confident that R&D is the key for sustainable horticulture. I have worked with regional and provincial marketing boards, grower associations and individual field crop, orchard and vineyard operators. Today, INPRAS Consulting works to assist our clients in technology transfer and technology adaptation. Quite simply, this means that efforts are directed toward improving profitability and reducing crop loss due to environmental effects, pests and disease. Additionally, development and implementation of sound nutrient management strategies, research trials that collect thorough data, of crop production and soil conservation result in increased sustainability of agricultural operations.

My clients are individual growers, for profit and not for profit organizations, fertilizer manufacturers and distributors, wineries, vineyard, orchard and greenhouse operators. All these clients are in need of research results and research supporting funding. I am

proud that over the past 13 years, I have brought over 5 million dollars to Niagara Region growers and horticultural operators to support research and development in plant and soil science and innovation.

A lot of people in the ag-sector say that they don't want or need to be accredited by the OIA because it is not mandatory here like it is in most of Canada. Why did you choose to become professionally accredited?

Shortly after defending my thesis I joined (then) the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, in Vineland. At that time, I was encouraged by my colleagues to become accredited by the OIA, which I did. There remains a strong need for the OIA and professional registration since registration equals credibility. My clients demand it.

You are clearly passionate about soil conservation. What trends are you seeing today?

Frequently, our soils are being degraded by practices that don't use sustainable approaches. My focus in soil management consulting is returning to the soil what has been depleted. In my consulting practice, I develop and test with my clients the ways (be it the procedures or products) to improve the soil. I work impartially as I am not affiliated with any product or firm. I guess you could say that I work as an independent since I provide my clients with options based on their needs and sound science. There are a growing number of organic options and bio-fertilizers that can bring life to depleted soils. Successful technology application requires testing



and tailoring the options for a specific type of operation or soil.

What does being a Professional mean to you?

My professional practice is busy, stressful but always rewarding. I don't get asked anymore what "P.Ag." means. My professional accreditation is trust for growers and operators. As a P.Ag., I am part of a network of proven experts in agricultural and environmental business. I rely on this network and vice versa, it relies on me. Much of my business is dependent on my interaction with the network. For those who are working in this sector that are not OIA members yet, I strongly encourage them to consider the needs of your customers, your clients and to meet public expectations. Ag and environmental students you need to know that the future requires connectedness. It is up to you to take your education, professionalize it, and put it into practice in a way that supports sustainability approaches. Ontario needs more P.Ags and T.Ags to bring sound science and professionalism to grow the potential of this vital economic sector.

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