

Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association SOIL CHAMPION

Desire to make a difference drives Soil Champion's career



Photo Credit: Peter Reschke

When Christine Brown was a student at the University of Guelph, she wanted to be an agricultural journalist. A summer job at Upper Thames Conservation Authority working with Andy Graham and Jane Sadler Richards on on-farm projects to encourage better soil management practices put her on a different path - and it's one that has led her to receiving the 2023 Soil Champion Award from the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA).

"I kind of fell into this career. I wanted to do something that would have a positive impact and that summer job piqued my interest in soil," says Brown, who today is the Field Crop Sustainability Specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA). "On the farm is one of those rare places where your actions can really make a difference, and I was able to do plots and work hands-on with equipment at a time when no-till was new."

Her first job after graduating from Guelph took her to Grand River Conservation Authority where she worked on the conservation tillage program. Eventually, she was hired by OMAFRA where she's worked on soil conservation, nutrient management and now sustainability for field crops.

"In the early 90s, the soil and crop specialists at the ministry were asked to pick a focus or specialty and as an animal science grad, I was asked to focus on manure management - and that was the start," she recalls.

She eventually transitioned from nutrient management lead to sustainability specialist, which expanded her work to overall soil health. Her focus now is nutrient management and the application and use of manure and other organic amendments like compost, biosolids and digestate, as well as best management practices to support better soil health and overall farm productivity.

Brown is a key contributor to OMAFRA's AgriSuite program, has created and edited a large number of factsheets and publications, including the OMAFRA Agronomy Guide, and is a member of the OMAFRA Soils Team. She's also active on Twitter, regularly prepares the OMAFRA Field Crop Report, contributes to OMAFRA radio reports, and is a frequent speaker at a wide range of meetings and conferences.

"To me, soil health means looking at the whole system in ag, what is happening below the surface as much as how soil is impacting growth above," she explains. "Healthy soil is the key to sustainability - and it's about a balance of fertility, water, air, nutrients and microbiology, most visibly worms that can support life above and below the ground."

Throughout her career some of the most meaningful moments for Brown have come when someone has called her with excitement at something new they've tried on their farm.

Her soil health advice to farmers includes:

- Don't be afraid to try something new and try it on a small scale first.
- Talk to other farmers.
- Walk your fields and put a shovel in the ground with the curiosity of a kid to see what's beneath the surface.

"It's humbling to win this award and to know that the contributions we've made have been noticed by somebody and are appreciated," she says. "One person can't make a difference all by themselves and I've been privileged to be part of several teams, especially the soils team, where a bunch of us came together to try to make a difference."

The Soil Champion Award is awarded annually to an Ontario farmer or individual working in extension to recognize a strong soil advocate. Nominations for the 2024 Soil Champion can be submitted to OSCIA any time up to November 1, 2023. Visit ontariosoilcrop.org to learn more.



Photo Credit: Brittany Roka, OSCIA

**Recognizing outstanding achievements and advocacy
in the cause of soil management excellence**



Grassroots Innovation Since 1939