

New respect for old wheat

Reclaiming heritage varieties requires culinary as well as agricultural expertise

by Jennifer Scott

The Maritime Heritage Wheat Project began in 1998. Since then, a lot of grain has been grown and a lot of bread has been baked – though this still represents scarcely the thinnest slice of commercial wheat production. As we progress slowly toward reclaiming heritage varieties as a viable option for organic farmers in the region, we continue to learn at each step along the way.

The project was initially a collective effort involving the Canadian Heritage Wheat Project (CHWP), New Brunswick's Speerville Mill, the Maritime Certified Organic Growers, and the New Brunswick Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. We recognized that the demand for locally grown organic wheat exceeded the supply. The question was, how can we support organic growers in their efforts to grow bread wheat?

We thought we could find varieties that would be superior to Roblin, which was typically grown in the Maritimes at that time. We obtained a number of modern varieties favored by organic growers in similar climate regions, and some small quantities of heritage varieties from Sharon Rempel at the CHWP; from the Canadian Clonal Genebank; from hobby



Acadia wheat being grown by Rob English of Jolly Farmers near Woodstock, New Brunswick. Acadia is one of five wheat varieties chosen for further evaluation by the Maritime Heritage Wheat Project.

growers and from Agriculture Canada.

Our criterion for including a wheat in a trial was that it was recommended by someone – preferably an organic grower in a region similar to ours. It was enlightening to talk with Loic Dewardin, a grower who is part of a farmers' cooperative near Montreal. Farmers there are well ahead of us in terms of criteria for selection, milling, quality testing, and organizing the growers to supply

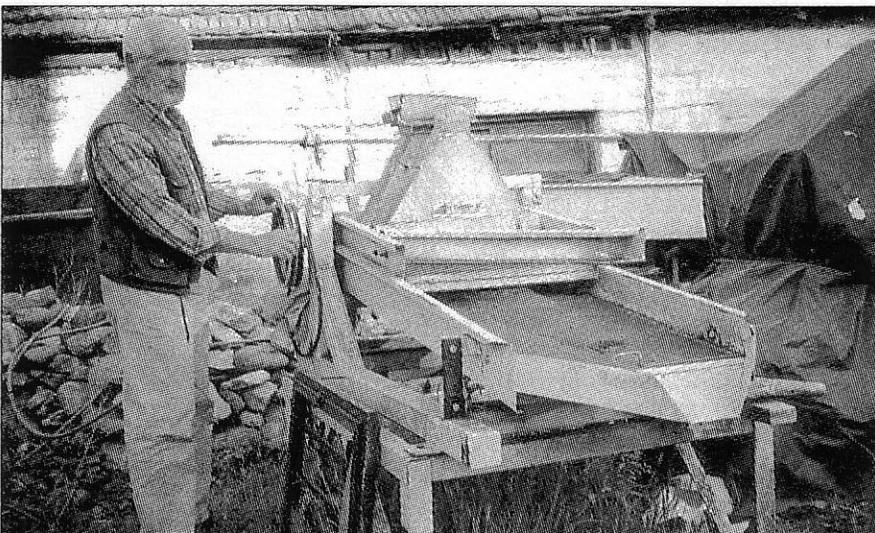
the mills. He really opened our eyes.

Our evaluations showed little difference in yield between modern and heritage varieties. We chose five promising ones for further evaluation: Selkirk, Acadia, Red Fife, Pollett, and Coteau. Roblin was also kept for comparison. Some of the newer varieties, such as Barrie, were also promising.

Each variety was given to a farmer who would grow it and distribute seed on a volunteer basis. For example, Speerville Mill commercialized the Acadia variety, which did very well in 2002, though in 2003 its yield and quality were disappointing.

One of the biggest challenges of wheat cultivation is getting on the land early enough to plant, with the goal of getting the crop harvested before it gets too damp and cold in the fall, not to mention before the soil gets too soft from rain. Disease is another factor. We want to avoid fusarium in particular, but any fungal disease is a potential problem. Weed control usually factors into planting in spring and pre-plant cultivation in fall. Sometimes land has to be worked for a year prior to planting. Then finger weeding is quite effective for those who have the gear.

We found that location, agronomic



This is the gravity table Takis Litsas, a Greek eco-grower, uses to get material of a different specific gravity out of the wheat once it is harvested. This past April, Jennifer Scott visited Thessaloniki, Greece, to explain the Maritime Heritage Wheat Project to European groups doing similar work.