

# [***Debating the role organic matter plays in soil health***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BB0-65G1-DYWW-80BF-00000-00&context=1516831)

Ontario Farmer

February 13, 2024 Tuesday

Final Edition

Copyright 2024 Ontario Farmer All Rights Reserved

**Section:** NEWS; Pg. B2

**Length:** 359 words

**Byline:** Peter Reschke, Ontario Farmer

**Body**

***Soil*** organic matter. What does it do for you? Do the numbers actually matter? And how do you differentiate the good from the bad? These were all questions that came up during a panel discussion at this year's Ontario Agriculture Conference. The topic was 'Making sense of ***soil***'and, after a brief attempt to define ***soil health***, that small percentage of the ***soil*** quickly took the spotlight.

No really, why do we make such a big deal out of organic matter content? "For me, it's the gateway for ***soil*** structure," said Jennifer Doelman, a farmer and CCA based in Douglas. Farming on a heavy clay ***soil***, she's learned that those organic matter particles "make the ***soil*** more friable...gives me channels for the roots to follow...holds water less tightly."

Dan Petker, on the other hand, farms the sandy ***soils*** of Norfolk County neat Port Rowan. His ***soils*** can be as low as 0.1 per cent OM. "I get excited when I see 2.5 or three per cent," he says.

Organic matter is difficult to hang on to for very long in these ***soils*** so he sees it, not so much as something to build or save, but more of "a transactional account...something we have to manage."

For Odette Menard, a researcher with Quebec's agriculture ministry, organic matter is "a good way to start thinking about ***soil health*** characteristics...an index that defines what we are looking at."

It forces us to look below ground since roots are the key factors in building ***soil*** organic carbon. Some 45 per cent of the carbon in the root system goes into building ***soil*** organic carbon compared to only seven per cent of what's above ground, she explained.

But she also stressed the need to make the distinction between 'good'and 'noy so good'organic matter. "I would rather have four per cent high quality organic matter than 12 per cent low quality," she said.

How do you differentiate the two? "Good organic matter is related to the way carbon is held in the ***soil***," Menard explained. It's tightly bound and cycles slowly through the system compared to lower quality OM, which turns over much more quickly.

The former is created by perennial plants, whose roots remain longer in the ***soil***, creating more macropores, she said.

**Graphic**

/ Dan Petker and Odette Menard;; (See hardcopy for photo);

**Load-Date:** February 13, 2024

**End of Document**