**“OUR COUNTRYSIDE: A LIVING SPACE TO SHARE”**

**Cultivating good relationships to live together in harmony**

**Soil health as collective wealth**

An essential resource for the growth and vitality of crops, the soil is the most precious asset for farmers and the main component for their work. A living, productive soil is the foundation for agriculture. This is why farmers participate in training, educate themselves, and increasingly adopt agri-environmental practices. Healthy soil requires less manure and fertilizer for the same yield. It is more stable and less prone to erosion. It also supports biodiversity and offers a higher availability of nutrients.

Practicing sustainable agriculture means seeking optimal yields rather than maximum yields to prevent soil depletion. It is important to know crops’ nutrient requirements and the soil characteristics of each plot where crops are cultivated. Without using any excess, farmers apply fertilizers to maintain soil fertility, particularly organic fertilizers from farm animal manure. Fertilizing crops is an activity that is closely monitored in Québec. Under the Agricultural Operations Regulation, farmers must have their agronomist prepare a fertilization plan every year, indicating the doses of manure, mineral fertilizers, and nutrients necessary for their crops, while respecting the soil balance. Farmers also keep a record of fertilizer applications to avoid saturating the soil with fertilizers and to protect the soil and water.

Protecting the precious resource of healthy soil means maintaining a composition rich in organic matter and nutrients, avoiding wind and water erosion, taking care not to damage the soil with agricultural machinery, and preventing the soil structure from becoming too compact or unstable. Healthy soil allows plants to grow well, and it also plays an essential role in the water cycle, in purification, in the degradation of pollutants, in supporting biodiversity, and in reducing greenhouse gases.

To maintain or improve soil health in the fields, farmers also use a number of other practices: crop rotation is preferred (this means not cultivating the same crop in the same field every year), ground-cover plants are used to prevent erosion and feed the soil, the use of farm machinery is limited, direct-seeding eliminates tillage, and crop residues are left behind to fertilize the soil…

The soil is a living ecosystem that must not become degraded or depleted. Whether in the crop fields or in the private garden, it is essential to keep our soils healthy so that what is growing is nourished and can grow to nourish us in turn.