

## Flavour from tropical Queensland

# Top bananas in southern markets

For those who have tasted an organic banana grown to perfection, there is no going back. With an increasing number of consumers realising this, the demand for organic bananas has never been better, according to Frank and Lucille Rick, long-standing northern Queensland organic banana growers.

Based south of Innisfail in the Mena Creek area, the Ricks are well known in the Victorian wholesaling industry as one of the best producers of consistent quality Cavendish bananas for the southern markets.

The secret? According to Frank there are no shortcuts and fast bucks in the game. It is about a long-term farm plan to manage soil, and in turn, plant health. Looking at the Rick's plantation today one can see there have been no shortcuts made.

Frank started growing bananas in 1962 with his father and two brothers at Mission Beach, and hasn't looked back. "Back then," Frank says, "we were packing a premium product into wooden boxes." There were fewer banana farmers back then, with a market nowhere near what it is today, he says.

Frank and Lucille began converting to farming bananas organically in the early 1990s, and joined the BFA in 1998 when it was still conducting the certification which Australian Certified Organic now does on BFA's behalf.

The biggest input to the farm it would seem is a lot of trudging up and down hills on the property, or driving banana bunches into the packing shed. Typical of Frank's innovative style, he has been using the centre-board trailers for banana hauling long before they ever became standard in the industry.

"People used to laugh and say the bananas would fall off the trailers, just sitting there. I suppose people laugh at most things until it becomes common practice," says Frank. He and his brother Charles built the first centre-board banana trailer in the north in 1969.

In 1984 Frank designed and made a dehanding tool shaped like a scooped, pointed spade, the concept was not new but at the time he was unaware of this; his design made "dehandler" the most popular position in the shed, and one even the children could do. That prototype is still in use today but has been superseded by a model designed to cope with larger hands.

### PRODUCTION SYSTEM

The Ricks have a rotation to assist in disease and pest management, as well as fertility management.

There are sections where pumpkins and other vegetables are grown, sections of pasture, including additional pasture areas for a sideline in a number of Brahmin cattle, and then

back into bananas. A large flock of pampered hens free range among it all.

The farming system keeps Frank active, and very fit for his age, he works full-time with assistance from the family with the weekly cutting and packing.



Frank and Lucille Rick

The forest floor cover – it truly feels like a forest when walking through the Ricks' stands of bananas – plays a range of critical roles. Besides harbouring a range of insects, perhaps some still unidentified as predators of banana pests, the cover protects soil from eroding, builds organic matter and, with the pinto peanut being used, also adds to the nitrogen needs of the plants.

Frank's view of advice from the DPI? Listen to them and then do the opposite of what they tell you! "Pinto peanut was trialled by (the department) some years back with what was viewed as not an ideal outcome. As a consequence there was advice not to use this leguminous (nitrogen-fixing) ground cover. There was even a view

that it climbed trees, which is a nonsense," Frank says. Looking at the plantation today, one can see that the pinto is one of Frank's best allies on the farm.

Frank stands near what used to be a gully. "You could park a car in that in the past and not see it," says Frank. Pinto now covers the area and holds the soil together during those torrential downpours that northern Queensland is famous for.

### WEEDS

Looking at the Ricks' plantation today one wonders how it could function so effectively without the pinto.

The thick cover chokes out most weed species, with Frank chipping or pulling by hand the occasional, persistent weed. In general, the cover self-manages. This is the beginning and the end of what is usually one of the most problematic organic farming challenges – weed management.

In regard to the suckers, Frank manually chops them out as he inspects his stands each week. Inspection is critical to monitor for disease and pest presence.

Frank views the fixation on cleanliness and clean-downs of people and vehicles on to farming properties as misguided. "If they (weed seeds) are going to come in there will be birds and the wind and all sorts of means of getting here. A lot of the weeds have a role to play in the farming system and are often under-estimated and under-utilised," he says.

Franks believes that the deep taproot of species such as the pinto helps in bringing up nutrients from further down in the soil profile.

"Most farmers are fanatical about washing down cars and

people before they come on to a property to avoid 'contamination'. I believe that if you have a well balanced and diverse organic farm, you just simply should not get infested with any given weed or disease."

## PESTS AND DISEASES

In what is a very common response from organic farmers who have been in the business some time, pests that are viewed as endemic to this production sector just do not have the prevalence and so the importance for Frank.

"Someone in NSW once said to me there is no way you can beat the beetle borer. But up in the north, bananas grow ahead of the beetle. Also the growing environment is critical. When you have a good pH and plenty of organic matter the beetle just doesn't seem to be a pest.

"The only other one is a rust thrip, but he attacks the fruit – they nibble at the skin – there's some good organic product – Entrust (a BFA registered product) is working well – spraying under bags after bagging the bunches.

"Black Sigatoga was of course in the Tully area, not threatening Innisfail. Yellow Sigatoga occasionally pops its head up and we rely on small doses of copper if this looks like getting away," Frank says.

## FERTILITY AND PRODUCTION

Apart from rotations and the pinto, Frank ensures the soils are balanced with a range of Nutritech products, especially naturally-occurring potassium sulphate and rock phosphate.

He supplements this with another BFA-registered local product Minplus, which is ground up basalt full of trace elements. Frank believes this plays a key role in remineralising the soil. "This is what organics is all about."

## PACKING AND MARKETING

For all their hard work, Frank and Lucille are known in the Melbourne markets as the best banana growers in Australia. Their wholesaler for those markets is Organic Wholesalers who have never-ending praise for the Ricks.

East West Organics in Deloraine, Tasmania, speak with the same high regard. Quality organic bananas are always in demand and the Rick's fruit is consistently top quality.

"It is essential to have a trusting and very workable relationship with your buyer or buyers," says Lucille, "knowing that they are in there with you for the long term, not just when things are rosy."

## NETWORKING

Lucille Rick views regional networking as a vital part of their organic farming activities.

"The exchange of information you get from farm visits in your area, and the know-how of other farmers is part of a never ending search for perfecting organic farming," says Lucille. "It is farmers who know what is going to work and what is not, not an academic or a government regulator that sits in an office."

Frank and Lucille are two of the founding members of the Organic Producers' Association of Far North Queensland, (OPA FNQ) which began in June, 2004, when a public meeting was called by OPAQ (Organic Producers' Association of Queensland) to elect a steering committee to oversee the formation of an organic body to serve the far northern region of the state. Lucille was elected chairperson of that committee and tackles the job with her typical enthusiasm.

Lucille has great concerns with non-regionally focused



**Pinto peanut at the Ricks' – as both a ground cover smothering weeds and as a nitrogen fertiliser.**

groups that are driven by politics only, and without due regard to procedures and the interests of local members. "The strength of OPA FNQ is that we are regionally focused with representation of real producers in this region. Camaraderie and a willingness to share hard-won knowledge provides a firm base for our organisation."

Lucille, as president of OPA FNQ, says its success stems the dedication of its entire executive and members and pays tribute to the management committee, especially secretary Rosemary Burgess.

"In our industry it is very important to be involved and to be attentive to your organisation's democratic and representative processes. There are too many cases where groups evolve into something that in no way reflects the interests of the very people who created it in the first place," Lucille says.

And the future? "There are many new entrants to the organic industry these days. Some remain and some disappear as fast as they appear. The stayers for the long term will be those that realise there ain't such a thing as a fast farmed (organic) banana. They are a labour of love," say both Lucille and Frank, "which bear bountiful fruits for those willing to put in the hard work."

## CONFERENCE

OPA FNQ is proud to be presenting the first Tropical North Queensland Organics Conference, June 15-16, 2005, in Cairns, featuring an impressive line up of speakers, including Dr Elaine Ingham, who will run a soil symposium after the conference. ■

**Contact:** Growers interested in the Organic Producers' Association of Far North Queensland (OPAFNQ) should phone Rosemary Burgess (07) 4067 6492 or Lucille Rick (07) 4065 3254. Also watch the BFA website and Organic Advantage for upcoming events in FNQ, website < [www.bfa.com.au](http://www.bfa.com.au) >.