



Katrina Hobbs with Country Heritage Feeds certified organic stock feed.

Successful conventional business sees future in organic

In 1983 Andrew Youngberry began to grow organic vegetables on his farm near Toowoomba when he encountered pressure from the markets he was supplying. They wanted a consistent supply of product with no blemishes, so Andrew explored hydroponic production and was soon operating the first successful commercial hydroponic vegetable farm in Australia.

At this time hydroponics was a new technology and offered benefits in vegetable production. Andrew says, 'Markets were demanding a consistent supply of quality vegetables year round, so I had to explore my options.' By researching his options Andrew recognised incredible market potential in growing the continental cucumber, a variety of cucumber he had first heard about many years before. He imported the first continental cucumber seeds from Europe in 1984 to test their acceptance in Australian conditions.

The venture proved to be an enormous success. Andrew, recognising the need to expand, bought a property at Hampton and named it Eden Farms. He was soon

» Eden Farms began over 24 years ago as a vegetable and herb farm near Toowoomba, QLD. The business has become a leader in its field, diversifying its operations and expanding into the organic market. Story by **Adam Birkby**.

supplying the Brisbane Markets with continental cucumbers, and it wasn't long before the supermarkets noticed the quality of his produce and he began to supply directly to them.

Today Eden Farms has 11 hectares (28 acres) under greenhouse, producing in excess of 10 million cucumbers year round, and employs a staff of around 150. Eden Farms is the leading supplier of continental cucumbers to Coles, Woolworths and other supermarkets, as well as Mrs Crockets and McDonalds in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

Further expansion

Andrew's daughter Katrina Hobbs has helped the family business expand into markets outside of cucumbers. Katrina remembers the beginnings of her career in

the family's businesses. 'Dad went to buy a silo from the owner of the old Farmstock feed mill and came home the new owner of the entire feed mill,' she recalls.

When Katrina's father was establishing this newly acquired stockfeed business he was having trouble finding an appropriate manager to oversee its operation. One night at the dinner table her father asked her to 'have a go' at setting up the stockfeed business.

Katrina accepted her father's offer. She was only 20 years of age and remembers her enthusiasm in building the business. 'Without hesitation I set off to the feed mill the next morning and began work. We had no customers, we had no suppliers and we didn't even have an accounting program set up. Day by day with a lot of hard work I began to work at building Country Heritage Feeds,' she recalls.

Andrew Youngberry in organic wheat paddock, Moolan Downs.



Move to organic

Katrina initially saw the benefits of organic as a marketing tool, evident when she says, 'I realised the need to find a niche within the stockfeed market and organic production became that niche.' Country Heritage Feeds became the first feed mill in Australia to gain organic certification.

Katrina believes that experiences like these, and her will to succeed, are due to having an entrepreneurial father. 'My father has taught me to think big! Often it is not our circumstances, but our attitude towards these circumstances, that determines whether we succeed or fail,' she says.

With the success of Country Heritage Feeds, Katrina and her family have seen the benefit of diversification into organic. In addition to Eden Farms and Country Heritage Feeds, they also have Moolan Downs Aggregation and Country Heritage Macadamias, all under the banner of the Eden Farms Group. These organic ventures are all separate entities; Eden Farms does not work in parallel production of conventional and organic. Katrina says that the Eden Farms group of businesses do work together within their organic practices. Katrina says, 'Moolan Downs grows grain for the feed mill and Country Heritage Feeds has provided stockfeed to Moolan Downs. We also buy in grain from other producers and provide stockfeed to a wide range of customers in every

Australian state.'

Moolan Downs Aggregation has 16 500 acres of certified organic land west of Tara in Queensland. Here they specialise in organic grain, sheep, wool and prime lambs, which are all certified organic. Moolan Downs sells cattle to OBE Beef and Australian Country Choice (ACC), who supply their products to numerous outlets including large supermarket chains, such as Coles and Woolworths. In a normal season Moolan Downs stocks 1000 to 1500 growing cattle and 5000 to 7000 sheep – all certified organic. Although 'like many other farmers, we are also reducing stocking densities due to the drought,' says Katrina.

Macadamias

Country Heritage Macadamias is a new venture, which has seen the establishment of an orchard containing over 40 000 trees. Once planting is completed, organic certification will be obtained for this business. Katrina can foresee this new venture as being extremely successful, so much so that she will eventually look at expanding into the world export market.

Katrina and her family see organics as the way of the future. They see their future in organics as reliant on working towards sustainable farming systems in all of their

business interests. Katrina believes the key to the organic industry becoming a sustainable management system, and a sustainable business overall, lies in the industry's ability to meet consumer demand for clean, healthy organic food.

According to Katrina, the focus of those directly involved in the supply chain is clear. She says, 'We all need to work on developing a consistent supply of high quality product.' Once this is achieved she believes business and market sustainability issues will be answered and with that an increased opportunity for those looking at getting into the organic business. She says, 'Whether we like it or not, businesses are increasingly impacted by the global market and driven by the demands of the supermarket chains. Balance this with strong consumer demand and you have a very promising market to build a business upon.'

The fact that a successful conventional producer is diversifying into the organic market is testament to the future and sustainability of the organic market. Katrina urges others to follow suit. 'As the organic sector moves towards more consistent and mainstream production, of course there will be teething problems but, overall, it will be very rewarding not only environmentally, but also financially,' she says. 