

Back to Basics #1:

# What is organic farming?

In the first of the Back to Basics Series, we explore some questions about organics that people want to know but are afraid to ask.

**1. ORGANICS is about health management and disease prevention with no synthetic chemicals:** Organic and biodynamic farming means farming in a way that cares for the environment without relying on synthetic chemicals and other unnatural interventionist approaches to farming and food production.

Hence, organic food comes from organic farms using the best of both traditional agriculture and modern techniques, using nature and natural processes as its bedrock for producing foods and fibres.

Rather than using synthetic pesticides to kill pests, farmers prevent pests by planting a diverse range of crops, by rotations, using natural biological and environment-friendly inputs, and conserving natural ecosystems.

This means no artificial pesticides, no synthetic herbicides, no hormones and no growth promotants, which otherwise have a questionable place in our aim to maintain healthy bodies as well as healthy farms.

The same logic of natural and preventive health management (rather than reactive disease management) is applied to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) which the organic industry prohibits from use in production of organic foods.

With many safe, proven forms of farming already available, the organic farmer believes it is important to allow Mother Nature to provide us food the way nature intended.

Also, the organic industry believes that not enough is understood about GMOs, and while there also is a sceptical marketplace of consumers regarding this technology in the food industry, the organic industry believes it is best to be precautionary in its approach to such new, untested technologies that are yet to be established as necessary.

So what is the fundamental difference between organic farm practices and "conventional" or non-organic?

Organic farming has a total focus on soil health. By focus-



By focusing on soil health first, the health of the plant follows.

ing on soil health first, the health of the plant follows. This, in turn, enables the plant to feed animals on a balanced, healthy diet. It is all about health management (not disease control) and preventive techniques.

Like with the human body, if you treat your body firstly in terms of (disease) prevention and healthy practices, you are less likely to ever need interventionist medicine, let alone surgery. Organic farming aims to achieve the same outcome where prevention of disease and the focus on health ensures a productive farming environment.

**2. Biodiversity in organic farms:** Organic farms are required to set aside at least 5% of their farming environment to biodiversity areas where there is no intensive agricultural production. This can include wetlands, native pastures and tree buffers, which act as excellent harbours for native animals and other plants.

This, in turn, helps create a more natural setting and protect the environment while assisting in the organic systems management on-farm through use of functional biodiversity to manage pests and diseases.

**3. Chemicals (and GMOs) in the environment:** With its



Tomatoes at Bauer's Organic Farm at Gatton, Queensland.

prohibition on synthetic pesticide and fungicide treatments, as well as prohibiting GMOs, organics help protect the wider, as well as on-farm, environment where our foods are produced.

**4. Soils and water efficiency:** Building healthy soils, increasing soil organic matter and soil life help the soil retain more moisture.

In a water-scarce continent, this is a very useful farming practice and enables organic farmers through time to be more efficient in their water use and thus have less water needs. It also helps the farm get through periods of extended drought.

**5. Agriculture and human health:** It is increasingly being recognised that at a fundamental level, the health of the soil is inextricably linked with the health of humans.

Organic farming is about profoundly changing the way we look at, and manage, our health. Soils deficient in nutrients, unbalanced and with little life, are unlikely to produce the kinds of healthy plants and food that humans and animals need for optimum nutrition.

Many disease and health problems of the modern world may well be prevented or reduced through a greater focus on healthy and health-giving farming systems. Organics is part of a movement to profoundly change the way we do produce our foods and the way in which we view health management in our communities.

**6. Productivity of organic farms?** The notion of productivity, that is, a farm producing a certain amount of goods, is an important issue to look at. Often we measure productivity of a farm one commodity or crop at a time only. This often distracts us from the overall productivity of the farm.

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For instance, instead of talking about a certain farm producing X tonnes of wheat in a year, or X tons of carrots, organic farming systems are more oriented to the multiple yields they might deliver – this might be livestock, a number of crops and, most importantly, the longer-term sustainable farming system that can keep on being productive.

Many organic farms are just as productive, and sometimes more so, than conventional farms. How can this be? Conserving soil organic matter helps retain moisture, thus helping through a drought period in making the farm more resilient and more productive in the long term.

Also, diversifying both cropping and livestock production (something less relied on than traditionally many years ago) enables the farmer to trade in more than one commodity and hence furthers the resilience of their farming system.

Good organic farming is about creating the environment for a resilient, productive farming system. There are, however, some other externalities, or external costs, of farming that organic farming internalises. For instance, there are no pesticide or herbicide residues found in our waterways from organic farming activities.

Everyone in our society bears this cost, including contamination in fish stocks and polluted water that we consume – and it detracts from the true or real picture of productivity in its broader sense. So organic farming can offer benefits to both the surrounding environment as well as the farmer by working with nature. ■

*More questions about organic food and farming will be answered in the coming edition of AOJ.*