

Keeping it simple

– why small producers continue to grow

By JAIME NEWBORN

‘SMALL GROWERS WILL remain incremental to the future of the organic industry” says Howard Rubin, who has retired as chairman of the Organic Growers of Australia (OGA- Small Producers Program) after more than two decades.

“It’s that old saying – from small acorns, large oak trees grow.”

Regarded by many as one of Australia’s organic pioneers, Mr Rubin’s own foundations as an organic herb grower began in the back yard, cultivating plants for his practise as a herbalist and homeopath.

“When I began, the term ‘organic’ wasn’t even used – it was just growing the only way we knew how,” he says.

His efforts as founder of the OGA in 1989 put Australian organic growers on their first steps towards creating an organised body with recognised certification standards. It marked the beginning of an industry now valued at more than half a billion dollars, a far cry from 20 years ago.

“In 1989, there was no recognised set of standards for organic,” says Mr Rubin.

“So a group of us – mainly herb growers - put together a very simple manual, around eight pages, which outlined clearly and concisely what one had to do to be certified organic. Then we put together a manual for auditors and it has developed from there – the organic standards we see today are now over 100 pages long.”

OGA gained AQIS accreditation in early 1990, enabling it to operate as a organic certification body.

Mr Rubin says the focus of those original standards was on soil health, prohibiting chemicals, self sufficiency and small scale farming in a ‘closed loop’. (A closed loop operation reuses farm waste materials in the production system for recycling nutrients and energy.)

“The process of organic certification should not be so complicated that growers find it too hard to begin.”



Howard Rubin and wife Elle.

“I would be surprised if anyone was farming on over an acre back then. It was all hand tilling, and a relatively simple system to monitor,” says Mr Rubin. “The diversity that came from small farms was incredible.”

He says it is essential that growth of the organic industry also supports small growers.

“One of the biggest challenges for small operators in the future will be the dominance of supermarkets, which can make it harder for them to market products and reach customers.

“Small growers can be assisted through fostering on-the-ground initiatives like farmers markets and small retailers, where they most frequently sell their goods. The increasing popularity of, and interest from consumers in farmers markets is something I would like to see continue.”

Mr Rubin says reduced certification fees and a less convoluted certification paper trail should also help.

“Making certification financially viable is something OGA has striven to do for years, and I am proud that we’ve been able to reduce costs for small growers.”

He says certification is still important in small scale or supplementary organic production.

“Organic certification does not just protect the consumer – it gives farmers a very important benchmark. Without a standard, growers are working in a vacuum. With a standard producers learn to keep farm diaries and records, and to think ahead by



OGA members gather together at an AGM in 2001.

proactively creating organic management plans. They become better managers and gain a broader understanding of their operations.”

But he says certification should remain as simple as possible.

“In my opinion, it should always have been the responsibility of the non-organic operators to declare they were using poisons, not the responsibility of the organic farmers to say they weren’t.

“It hasn’t happened that way – but by the same token, the process of organic certification should not be so complicated

that growers find it too hard to begin.”

OGA provides options for smaller growers as part of the BFA Group, after merging with BFA in 2007 - a move Mr Rubin sees as a major accomplishment.

“I am a big believer in strength in numbers,” he says.

Mr Rubin will now focus on running his organic tea business The Koala Tea Company while continuing in his role as Chief Financial Officer of the BFA Group.

BFA chairman, Doug Haas has accepted the role of OGA Chairman in addition to his current position. ☺

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Are you a small organic grower interested in becoming certified organic?

OGA (Organic Growers of Australia Small Producers Program) has been designed to nurture & provide market opportunities for smaller growers.

To be eligible for the OGA program, you must earn less than \$75,000* from sales of organic produce; and must be selling fresh produce to the local market only. *This figure is reviewed each financial year & is subject to change without notice

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OGA is part of the BFA Group - BFA, ACO & OGA
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