

Nuts about organic

By JAIME NEWBORN

WITH CONSUMER ATTENTION TURNING TO health and nutrition, demand for shelled treats of an organic variety is growing. Australian farmers are listening, and organic nuts will find their way into supermarket majors, boutique retailers and export markets in years ahead. Two organic nut growers talk about growing a premium product for very different markets.

Stahmann Farms

Location: Gatton, Qld

Production: Pecans

Market: Large retailers and export markets

Stahmann Farms Enterprises Pty Ltd interest in organic is no small matter. Currently Australia's largest conventional producer of pecan nuts and value added pecan products, Stahmann accounts for about 90% of Australia's 2700 tonnes in-shell pecan production.

The company's decision to trial an organic pecan farm in Gatton, Qld came after they discovered a market for organic nuts in Europe. The farm is currently "in-conversion" organic and is on track for A-grade organic status in January next year. The processing facility, established in 1982 in Toowoomba, is also certified organic.

According to Barry Kitchin, manager of Las Piedras, Stahmann Farms Gatton, the results are a reflection of any businesses ability to change its mindset and the product of a style of farming he says was initially "a significant challenge".



Young walnut trees at Wellwood Wallace in Wallace, Vic.

"Going organic was confronting for us. Consumer demand for health products and organic options is rising and the business decided to give it a go. Unfortunately, we had no real idea of how to go about it and very few organic pecan operations to get advice from," he says.

He says the process was a re-learning experience.

"We had to put our conventional farming knowledge temporarily aside, and approach things from a different perspective. It was difficult to think how we might control things without chemicals."

But he says after much reading and some trial and error, ideas came fast. The farm has hit on one method in particular to help ease the harvest pressure.

"We had to figure out how to keep the weeds from underneath our trees. We decided in winter to let a crop of clover grow very high, and then toward the warmer months of spring we slashed the clover and swept it on top of leaf litter under the trees. The clover would smother most weeds and without sun they would die. It was also a good source of nitrogen.

"At harvest time, we blew the blanket of grass and leaf off, leaving bare earth for reaping. Any leftover weeds, we'd cut off with a whipper snipper and we'd put all that leftover mulch into the middle of the orchard to help restore organic matter.

"The clover and leaf litter is fantastic in helping the soil break down. Each year we're doing it better, and getting our costs down."

Barry says an application of organic manure is laid down as a fertiliser at the start of each season, mid August – a process the farm used even as a conventional operation.

He says they are looking forward to marketing nuts as 100% organic next year.

"We decided to wait until we were through the in-conversion period before beginning our marketing, to avoid customer confusion," he says.

"We're looking primarily at export markets – our current markets include Europe, Japan, China, the Middle East, and New Zealand."

Currently Stahmann's organic farm consists of about 2000 trees on about 32 hectares. The Gatton Farm was established by Deane Stahmann in 1966 followed by the flagship property Trawalla near Moree, NSW, which now consists of about 80,000 trees on 700ha.

Wellwood Wallace

Location: Wallace, Victoria

Production: Certified organic walnuts and walnut oil

Markets: Domestic boutique and independent retailers, restaurants, wholesalers, and direct-to- consumer

It has been 20 years since Erich Mayer and his partner Wendy made the decision to buy a rundown potato farm in Wallace (near Ballarat, Vic) and convert it into a walnut orchard.

Now, their vision of acres of large and beautiful trees – "we never wanted trees planted so closely they looked like a hedge," says Erich - has been realised.

Having followed organic principles of production since the outset, the farm's decision to take the final steps towards organic certification with ACO in 2007 has seen them become one of few suppliers of organic walnuts in Australia.



A sweeper is used during pecan harvest at organic farm Las Piedras near Gatton, Qld.

Three thousand walnut trees provide the domestic market with fresh walnuts – vacuum sealed the day they're cracked – as well as a premium, cold pressed organic walnut oil.

Nuts are supplied year round from the April-June harvest. Trees are shaken and fruit caught below, with any strays picked up by a rotating spiked wheel, or by hand. Pulverised rock fertiliser is the farm's input of choice (applied as both a fertiliser and soil conditioner), and copper sprays are not used.

Erich – who switched to organic growing after a former life in the financial sector - says he decided on walnuts because both the trees and the market are particularly hardy.

“Once grown, the trees are very staunch, reducing the need for applications of any kind,” he says. Walnuts take 50 years to reach full maturation, but are usually harvested commercially after five to eight years' growth.

The Australian Walnut Industry Association (AWIA) likewise cites walnuts grown in Australia as ideal for organic production, with few local pests and diseases to affect them. In contrast, orchards in California can be affected by more than 20 insects and 10 diseases as well as nematodes.

Erich says barriers to entry to the walnut market are also strong. “It is not easy for people to dabble in walnuts and the market is less likely to be oversupplied.”

Consumer response to the premium end product has been strong. Erich notes they could sell two to three times more walnuts than produced, and the farm's biggest organic issue remains weeding.

“We irrigate the trees using bore water and that makes mowing high grass or weeds difficult because of sprinklers and pipe lines.” says Erich.

After trialling a portable steam weeder which, while effective, was too slow for large areas, the farm has reverted back to mowing using more manoeuvrable machines.

“The newer, high tech mowers do a fairly good job without damaging the tree trunks,” says Erich.

Nuts are sold primarily into premium markets through independent and boutique retailers (for example, the David Jones food stores) as well as direct to in-the-know consumers from the farm's online store.

High end restaurants are also enamoured with the farm's walnut oil, cold pressed on a large screw press to produce a blend from up to eight walnut varieties.

Organic and gluten-free walnut flour is created from ground and sieved walnut remains.

Erich says he is content to keep the business at its current manageable size to ensure high quality remains at the operation's core. “There is nothing like a good walnut grown fresh,” he says. Walnuts require a Mediterranean climate: between 600 and 800 hours of temperatures below 10°C during winter (winter chill), a frost-free period during flowering, and temperatures below 38°C during summer. They generally favour deep sandy loam or clay loam soil. 🌱

For more information on Wellwood Wallace visit www.wellwood.com.au or on Stahmann farms visit www.stahmannfarms.com.au or email barryk@stahmann.com.au/richards@stahmann.com.au

Walnuts a top option

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