

# Small farming, great influence

## The Peaceful Gardens story

» Peaceful Gardens in Victoria's South Gippsland is certified through the BFA/OGA Small Producer Program. Managing director **Fiona Routledge** tells how her drive for healthy food and sustainable living led Peaceful Gardens Farm into an initiative which has created a diverse range of businesses maintaining quality control over the whole supply chain.

**P**aceful Gardens Farm recently held their annual open farm day. The invitation read: 'Take a walk through timeless beauty and experience the richness, beauty and simplicity that is part of making organics a lifestyle choice'. This is a one-off experience for many to see and feel nature at its best. The closest we may come to reliving this memory in our daily lives is to make a choice for fresh organic food and know how simple it is to prepare. Just a short drive to the village of Koonwarra, The Farmhouse Kitchen at Peaceful Gardens Organic Cooking School is assisting people to rediscover culinary skills lost in the bustle of their modern ways.

The Peaceful Gardens story begins some 14 years ago. The 60-acre property began small-producing fruit, vegetables, beef, lamb and pork, all as organic and as sustainable as possible.

Managing director Fiona Routledge explains how it developed from a vision shared between herself and Ian Robson. "We combined our skills and resources to develop a farm-based operation that supplied fruit and vegetables of an excellence that reminded consumers of the vitality and importance of quality produce free of pesticide residues," she says. "Ian was able to contribute 40 years of knowledge of the fruit and vegetable industry and I had the experience of establishing and running a small organic farming operation. This two-person collaboration has since grown into a great team of staff who share the passion for sustainable farming and food."

Today they grow 500 fruit trees – apples,



Christian Touw, 4 year old first cooking class, Peaceful Gardens.

pears, plums, apricots, cherries, figs, peaches, nectarines, almonds, various citrus (the occasional quince and nashi!) strawberries, raspberries, currants, gooseberries, boysenberries as well as herbs, meat and

flowers – mostly roses. Vegetable crops cover about 12 varieties on a small scale with an emphasis on heritage varieties. The seed is saved each season, with a natural progression from organic to biodynamic.



Ushi a Wagyu cow part of a small herd at Peaceful Gardens Farm. Wagyu meat is served at the Farmhouse Kitchen at the Peaceful Garden's cooking school.

Also nestled in the hills of the farm are rare breed animals – Grey Slate turkeys, English Leicester sheep, Wagyu cattle, Clydesdales and a Berkshire pig. Their Wagyu meat is used through the cooking school and Farmhouse Kitchen.

"All of our produce is harvested freshly and cooked in the kitchen using traditional farmhouse cooking methods that preserve the vitality, taste and nutrition of the produce," Fiona explains. "It's also utilised in our cooking school classes and TasteBuds label for bottling, jamming, biscuits, cakes and homemade organic meals which we sell at our own Organic Fix retail outlets throughout Victoria and NSW and our wholesale outlet Harvest Organic based at Melbourne Markets."

So how did they expand into wholesale? She says Peaceful Gardens farm produces relatively small quantities of produce, so in November 2000 they established The Organic Fix and The Organic Fix Growers Group, where they began building relationships with other growers to supplement the produce for

sale through farmers markets. This guaranteed a consistent supply of fresh organic produce as well as providing an invaluable outlet for the organic growers.

"We had already secured a supply contract wholesaling directly to Macro Wholefoods in their Victorian Stores. Natural diversification and a logical step from The Growers Group was to secure a space at Footscray Markets for wholesale of produce which assisted to secure the supply chain."

As a result, Harvest Organic started in November last year and is certified through ACO. "Having worked with the growers, we established very strong liaisons and could guarantee the quality," she says. "We also encouraged growers via the market and wholesale operation to be more aware of low-impact farming."

Where does the cooking school come in? The cooking school is the first certified organic cooking school in Victoria, started two years ago where people can learn about how easy and simple using organic produce and ingredients can be. They teach traditional

ways of cooking that preserve the nutrition and "life force" of the produce. Fiona says it's a place where people can rediscover the simplicity of preparing good food. "We endeavour to educate from the shop floor. One of the aims is to present organic as nothing extraordinary – quite normal – and try not to be too precious about it. People then feel safe to ask questions and learn."

Education about clean food still has a way to go though. Pierce Cody's marketing has helped and Jamie Oliver has been successful in cutting through the negativity which comes from a certain fear through lack of understanding. With the sophistication of eating out, food magazines and the diverse culinary choices available, there tends to be an over-complication to compensate for general lack of taste and quality. People have forgotten how to source really good food and how to cook it at home. Our classes are designed to show people what has been taken out of their diet for the sake of convenience. But it's no longer convenient when convenience becomes lack of energy, resulting in ill health and



Sandy Nicol, Peaceful Garden's Chef and coordinator of Organic Fix stalls at farmer's markets.

allergies. Our belief is that while we are all focussed on 'diets' no one will be focused on the real problems – that our food is grown and over-processed with chemicals, and is making us ill. Our produce is harvested fresh from our farm so we are able to showcase the high level of vitality available in farm fresh organic produce."

Their Schools Program also plays a part in teaching children the simplicity of cooking healthy nutritious organic meals in a fun, inspiring and interactive environment. "At our demonstrations the students taste the difference between food that has been processed with synthetic additives as opposed to organic food. It's important that children are able to make an informed choice in the purchasing and consumption of organic or conventional food. We want them to see organic food as a true health alternative – accessible, sustainable, nutritious, delicious, unprocessed and free from additives. We hope they learn to understand cooking with organic becomes a lifestyle choice. Carbon-neutral cooking has also become an element of this education."

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Where to for organics? The company chose to become organic as they wanted to substantiate their organic methods and support the claims of being organic in the marketplace. "Consumers are becoming more aware that the integrity of their organic produce is ensured if they eat 'certified organic' produce," Fiona says. "We believed that the BFA/ OGA Small Producer Program would support small farms that held a level of biodiversity at their core. It's structured to make the small producer feel that their smaller farm is still very relevant in the overall scheme of things and it allows embarking on certification without being overwhelmed by unnecessary standards which larger and exporting operations need to adhere to."

Fiona would like to see the eco footprint concept established mainstream across the

whole food supply chain in Australia, similar to The Carbon Footprint labeling that the Prince of Wales Foundation is initiating in the UK. "This is a huge job. It's not as simple as just calculating food miles, but potentially our kids will be better versed in both the food's carbon impact and the environmental impact of the food production and processing lineage of the food we eat, as opposed to the kilojoule obsession of the 80s and 90s."

The Peaceful Gardens small farm operation was the first step in the creation of a team of related businesses as diverse as the farm itself, spanning every level of the supply chain from grower to consumer over just seven years. It now consists of organic wholesale operation Harvest Organic, five organic retail stores, The Organic Fix, nine farmer's market stalls each month, the cooking school and the TasteBuds processing label. The business is not only organic but is accredited carbon neutral through Future Climate Australia.

It is difficult to fully grasp how this operation has developed into the sheer size and variety in such a small amount of time. Fiona says it has been made possible by great commitment and having trusting relationships between people sharing a similar vision.