

Organic seeds – a time and place for growth

WHEN is it worth following up on organic seed?

According to the first World Organic Seed Conference in 2004, organic seed can get confusing: Is it seed grown according to organic production methods; seed bred according to organically accepted methods; and/or seed varieties adapted to organic agriculture conditions of low-external inputs?

Their overall consensus was: Currently, the question of organic seed or not is not the biggest concern of organic farmers. The challenge of sourcing organic seed across an array of species and at a commercially viable volume remains an issue for most Australian organic producers.

At present, the derogation which allows

producers to source non-organic (chemically untreated) seeds where organic equivalents cannot be found is keeping industry afloat.

“From the angle of aiming for the complete integrity of traceable systems, I think use of organic seed will be important in years ahead,” Mara Seeds managing director, Stuart Larsson, says.

Mara Seeds sells a range of pasture-grass organic seeds as a small part of their diverse operations.

“But right now, it’s not always easy to find,” Mr Larsson says. “Soy, barley, wheat and oats – commodity items — are being serviced by seed producers but something more specialised and a lot of the vegetable seeds just aren’t there.”

BFA (Biological Farmers of Australia) Standards Chair, Dr. Andrew Monk, says while there is an obligation on organic growers to buy organic seed where viable; the reality of escalating organic production will see the Australian Organic Standard derogation with regards to seed remain, to allow growers access to the varieties they need.

“However, it is critical that growers producing for export markets, including the United States, realise there are differences in operations relative to the sourcing of seed that must be considered,” he says.

Even globally, the organic seed market is a slow developer behind the fast-paced food production sector. The World Conference



found that the market for organic seeds is growing to cater to two distinct sides:

- Small farmer groups in developing/developed countries interested in local or conservation seed varieties for local markets — these often involve community-based seed production systems focused on 'seed saving' and the rescue and development seed varieties best suited to low-input conditions; and
- Large-scale farmers supplying export markets and supermarkets whose needs are best met by modern (hybrid) varieties of commercial seed companies.

The conference found conventional seed companies, which also produce organic seeds, are the main suppliers to commercial growers but continued investment in organic seed is at risk if market conditions are not favourable for profit.

Mr Larsson agrees.

"I've got a great saying – you don't do anything unless you've got markets," he says. "It's volume that will turn the hand of seed producers. As the industry picks up steam, it will be catered to but we're not quite there yet."

Mr Larsson says registered Plant Variety Rights (PVR) for organic seeds – used by growers to claim royalties and fund the developed plant with particular characteristics — will also need market volume to develop.

"We have breeder rights on one species – Nemkat, a nematode-resistant variety for cane country," he says. "But without a high

volume market, a breeding program is very expensive. Organic seed currently relies on breeding that's coming from public varieties.

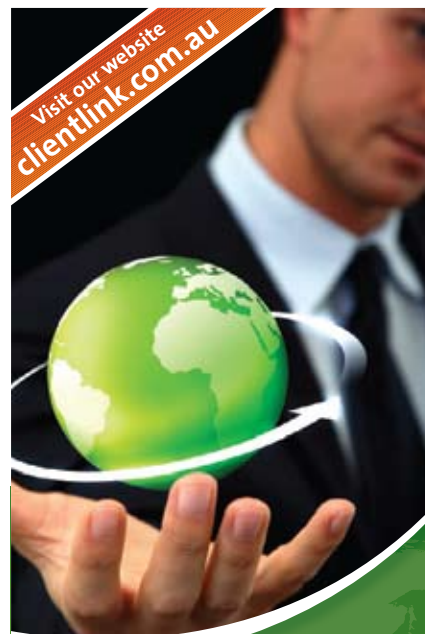
"Non-registered species which anyone can access suffice for the moment but when a species that is consistently planted gets rust or disease, varieties will need to be changed and that's easier when breeding rights are introduced.

"If you don't set the bar high, people aren't going to jump it – it's not hard to find organic seed in the cropping areas. For certain sectors, organic seed use could be made mandatory in the organic standards, with areas like horticulture being incorporated slowly over time."

For more information, contact Stuart Larsson, phone (02) 6664 5145; website <www.maraseeds.com.au>.

To request a list of where to buy organic seeds in Australia, contact the BFA office, phone (07) 3350 5716 ext 222; website <http://www.bfa.com.au/index.asp?Sec_ID=46>.

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