

The ins and outs of organic olive certification

By JAIME NEWBORN

GOING ORGANIC IS ONE option for olive farmers looking to expand their markets and explore niche opportunities. Olive growers are fortunate enough to be working with trees that (when established) are naturally hardy, and organic production and certification can be a smart option for managers already taking a softer approach to inputs.

Adrian Moller, manager for Bentivoglio Olives, says organic certification over the years has proven “not too difficult at all”.

Bentivoglio Olives (olive producer and processor) became certified with Australian Certified Organic (ACO) both for its farm and processing facility in Rylstone, NSW, nine years ago. It now grows certified organic olives which it processes into oil on 125ha of certified organic land (33ha of which is under production).

“While the very initial planning phase and creation of an organic management plan may seem a ‘paperwork’ challenge, as with anything, once you get your head around the system it becomes routine. On the



Bentivoglio Olives plantation in 2005 (trees are seven years old) at Rylstone, NSW.

production side of things, olives lend themselves to the organic process,” says Adrian.

He says within the wider olive industry the question ‘Is organic certification for me?’ is gaining relevance, with more producers than

ever considering making the transition.

In addition to its own crop, Bentivoglio Olives buys in and processes olives (both organic and conventional) from around Australia.

“More and more of our non-organic suppliers are becoming interested in the organic market. I have between eight and ten growers who began as conventional growers and are now in the certification process.

“Because olives are a naturally resilient breed, many olive producers currently operate in an ‘almost organic’ range, using ‘soft’ inputs that are also allowed for use in organic systems. They simply lack official accreditation,” he says.

Adrian says olive growers are unlikely to get pest or disease problems that can not be addressed with biological inputs.

“Olive production doesn’t tend to require a lot of inputs and there are ways to manage things. Olives are probably most likely to be



affected by olive lace bug and black scale and there are biological spray oils and products available for this if needed. We use pyrethrum as a last resort where required.”

He says an important part of Bentivoglio’s organic regime is having regular soil testing and leaf analyses done.

“This helps us to see if we have any mineral deficiencies and to make sure nutrients are going where they’re needed. If they’re not, we adjust our management.”

The company also uses leftover olive husk from oil processing as a recycled input in the form of compost.

“Because of the quantity of olives we process, we end up with a lot of husk – up to 80 tonnes per year,” says Adrian.

“We now use this as compost and have found the process works very well for us. It means we can utilise what would otherwise be a useless waste product to provide the bulk of our fertiliser.”

He says pH can be a problem for olive growers, addressed by fairly regular applications of lime.

“The 6.5 to 7 range is what olive trees prefer – a neutral to slightly alkaline soil.”

He says while weeds can be an issue for growers starting from scratch, mature olive trees easily out-compete them for nutrients.

“Keeping developed trees weed-free is not a necessity. Unlike more sensitive crops such as grapes, olive trees obtain nutrients and moisture before the weeds get a chance. We actually use weeds we slash with a ride-on as a form of mulch.”

In addition, the farm aims for constant ground cover.



Certified organic olive oil processing plant.

By using organic production methods Bentivoglio has seen its soil change from coarse granite to containing just over 5% organic matter.

“The only real issue we’ve had in terms of production is the management of almost 10 years with low or no rain. And from that respect I have no doubt that an increase of organic matter in the soil has helped our water-holding capacity and fertility,” says Adrian.

However, he says organic producers do

need to be on the ball for compliance reasons when it comes to record-keeping.

“I have gotten into a habit of dating and recording any observations made in-field and keeping spray and input diaries and so on. It also helps with general business management.”

Is there a market for organic olives?

Adrian says Bentivoglio has always found a willing market for its organic oil range. “Our product goes 60% to the domestic and 40% to export – primarily the US. We didn’t have trouble finding a market in Australia and in fact have had to knock back clients in the past. Provided the weather turns, we are optimistic about the growth of the sector.”

He says processing can become more complicated where organic and conventional oils are being managed at the same site.

“It’s all about timing, because we engage in a major clean-down before we process any organic product to ensure there is nothing there that shouldn’t be.

“We’ve gotten smarter with regard to this and now operate the plant so we have a solid block where organic growers deliver. We process only certified organic in this period, following which we move into processing of conventional product.”

He says overall the organic process has been a positive experience. “For olives, particularly, it is an industry I think the right kind of producer can do very well in,” says Adrian. ☺

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