



Organic Futures

“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

Welcome

Way back in April, I retraced my steps back to my childhood stomping ground. Though it sounds like a well-worn cliché by now, Dologau Farm in Mid Wales really is nestled well off the beaten track with the route from the nearest town and train station, the last stop before splashing into the sea, winding some 18 miles inland.

The countryside is lush with vivid greens sweeping out in a cascade of hills and deep cavernous valleys. Sheep flocked and tree-peppered, the fields spread out like a tartan picnic blanket, houses few and far between, dotted in peaks and troughs of greens and browns. Such is the familiarity and catharsis of the landscape that it has always felt more like home to me than anywhere else.

My few days there fell on the seventh week of no rain in the area. The tracks leading to Dologau threw up billowing plumes of thick dust behind the car as we drew in. The garden and fields were parched, the soil cracked and solid under foot. It is more than a little ironic for a land that has long held a well-earned reputation for being eternally wet, that it had now been without rain for so long. I was incredulous and somewhat alarmed by the aching throated vegetation and hard, brittle clumps of soil dried to powder in the drought. It felt closer to a desert than the squelching fields I know so well.

It is hard to conceive of such a scene now. On the back of weeks of torrential rain, with many thousands of people displaced and devastating growing conditions, April in Wales seems a very long time ago. The weather and seasons are the rhythms by which we all live and yet with the restless and unpredictable extremes in recent years, it is the fragility of life in limb and legume, which has been brought more sharply into focus.

News of the latest Foot and Mouth outbreak brought with it an even deeper sense of foreboding. I am not a farmer, I can barely begin to imagine the depth of the fear and anxiety that must have gripped each and every farmer across the country, but memories from the 2001 outbreak of pyre after burning pyre of animal carcasses is fresh enough to haunt me forever.

So, with rain dampening more than our moods and a collective shudder at the foot and mouth news, it really does fall to this issue of the Organic Futures Newsletter to lift spirits and keep the summer in our steps. The August dawn brings with it much to celebrate, not least the launch of the Apprenticeship Scheme, which heralds an exciting new era for the future of organic horticulture and is also the focus of this issue. In addition, we get to hear about the power of organic tomatoes, a good read for all aspiring growers and a loud call to all of you out there to come forward...

Warmest wishes to you all and happy reading!

Jem, Acting Editor



Removing Barriers - Training

The Apprenticeship Scheme Launch

On Wednesday 18th July, the Apprenticeship Scheme was officially launched at Abbey Home Farm. Below, Alan Schofield, from [Growing with Nature](#) offers us a few words of welcome and following that, Will Johnson, himself an apprentice at [Coleshill Organics](#), tells us about the evening and offers his own insights into the scheme itself.

'I welcome the recent launch of the apprenticeship scheme for workers on organic holdings. As a grower for 25 years, labour has always been a difficult issue and some form of recognition for the workers has been discussed in many arenas over the last 5 years or so.

The creation of the apprenticeship scheme is a huge step forward for both employee and employer in recognising skills that will be passed on from working with, and on, experienced grower holdings. Well done for all the effort that I know has gone into the creation of this scheme – we will certainly be making use of it in the near future.'

Alan Schofield, Growing with Nature

The Soil Association Apprenticeship pilot scheme

was officially launched last Wednesday at Abbey Home Farm. It was quite an open floor and most people present held court for at least a few moments; the scheme's development will be affected by many different people, not just from the Soil Association, but from the Organic Growers Alliance, the Organic Advisory Service, HDRA, Duchy college, and, of course, the apprentices and growers themselves.

The idea for an apprenticeship scheme has been buzzing around a group of growers in the South West for quite some time. With climate change and ever decreasing sources of energy, it is clearly time to get young, skilled, enthusiastic people onto the land, and to prepare for a return to small scale, ecological farming.

It is hoped that on completion of the apprenticeship, the apprentice will have a valued qualification, and, more importantly, practical skills and experience of the craft of organic horticulture. Hopefully, the grower too will benefit from the experience in terms of assessing and challenging their methods, and learning how to pass these valuable skills on.

The scheme will take two years to complete, the apprentice staying at the same farm for the duration and taking eight modules each year covering all aspects of horticulture. At the centre of each module will be an organised talk delivered by various experts in the particular field. There is an idea that these talks could take place two at a time (over a weekend) with a social event included. (I didn't even have to suggest it!)

One hot topic was the issue of fees. It is thought that the apprentice should front a substantial amount of the cost of the course, probably several hundred pounds, and this was greeted with everything from, "Bargain!" to a furtive biting of the bottom lip. I won't give my personal opinion on this one, but I did see sense in the point made that (me) paying for the apprenticeship should give the apprentice (me) an ownership of the scheme that will push them (me) to really get their (my) teeth into it. If the speakers at the events are true experts and the

qualification is recognised, it's not really a lot of money, you *could* say. Also, there were lots of ideas about trust funding if money is a problem.

The other main part of the scheme will be a dedicated hour of discourse each week between the grower and his/her apprentices.

Over time it is hoped the apprenticeship will be undertaken all over Britain, and there was even talk of the qualification being of equivalent status as NVQ and BTEC, though this was not seen as a very important aspect (the qualification's status) by the prospective apprentices.

The evening ended with a cheesy photograph and the thought that taking the course in its first year will be unique and brilliant because all of the growers will not yet be sick of having to teach young people how to run a bloody farm.

Apprenticeship opportunity

For people living on or near the beautiful Isle of Purbeck in Dorset, the [Purbeck Keystone Project](#) is an exciting new project that is offering, amongst wider aims, opportunities for young people to take an apprenticeship in farming.

Education officer, Duncan Forbes commented:

"We are excited in being able to support next generation of Purbeck farmers. These apprenticeships join up the skills of farming and landscape protection and will help farm businesses to be both economically and environmentally sustainable. We now need local farmers and young people to come forward to take advantage of this fantastic opportunity."

For more details please e-mail Duncan Forbes at duncanforbes@purbeck-dc.gov.uk or phone him on 01929 557 286.

Foot and Mouth Disease

For the Soil Association position on Foot and Mouth disease and comment from Director, Patrick Holden and Policy Director, Peter Melchett, please click [here](#).

Poetry

A poem with less of a green field subject matter this month, but more of a 'big blue' theme instead...!

Seascape

Blue-white powdery skies
Piqued with seagull cries,
Unrolled as far as eyes
Can see

Light slowly dimmed,
Fetching in the night,
A yolky-molten sun
Leaching out of sight

Crystals scattered, shone
Peaking and troughing
Once there, soon gone
Twinkling at each offing

—————
Lisping winds lift
Froth and foam thrift
From waves
And seashore drift

Beaches of stony tittle
Speckle-egged and brittle
Pinch toes
Tease and tickle

The lyric of the sea
Sings lullabies to me
Laundering words
Washing me free

Jemima Roberts

Book Review

'*The New Organic Grower*', Eliot Coleman

Chelsea Green Publications (distributed in the UK by [Green Books](#))

I discovered this book on the shelf residing in the small Organic section of Lackham College library.

At the time I was studying a course in Organic Horticulture and looking for a resource that told of growing veg on a small scale commercial basis, rather than the endless stream of garden orientated books, filled with pretty colour photos but lacking in solid experience-lead content. I was not disappointed.

Coleman has been a leading grower in the US since the early seventies; this book reflects his hard earned knowledge of thirty years of experimentation and diligent observation. I for one, as a self confessed vegetable trainspotter, was instantly drawn into a world of moveable polytunnels, rotation design, and specialist tools. It gives a simple grounded technical guide to a large range of horticultural themes and strikes a clever balance between the science and the craft aspects of growing. The economy of means in which he produces veg for market is impressive and encouraging for those of us looking to start up on a tight budget.

Moreover, the book is infused with the philosophy of the organic movement and elsewhere with nods to the Shakers and Thoreau along with agricultural innovators of the past and present. This philosophy is directly translated into his 'plant positive' growing techniques (correcting the cause rather than treating the symptoms) and views on scale, marketing and quality.

Although aimed at its Maine climatic conditions and US audiences, the majority of the book is relevant to the UK reader. His views on the use of Peat and other inputs may not meet with the approval of many. However, it is an ideal starting

point for new entrants thinking about growing for market and should have its rightful place in the growers' reference section, as many well-established growers will agree.

James Clapp, [Tolhurst Organic Produce](#)

Events

Organic Futures SOCIAL!

A reminder of our social to be held at Abbey Home Farm on the weekend of **15th-16th September:**

Camping, barbecues, organic bring-a-dish food, farm walks and a general improvised sing-songy weekend for all... and all at a bargainous £4 !

Hilary and Will at Abbey H-F have been kind enough to let us have our very own field and at present it is looking pretty empty so do come along. For further information and so that I can pass on an idea of numbers please contact me, Jemima at: jemimaroberts@hotmail.com ASAP!

The Spirit of Land, Sea and Soil

A unique conference being held on the Isles of Scilly, 7th -9th September.

This event on the Isles of Scilly is one of a series of workshops and conferences on Land and Spirit being arranged by the [Biodynamic Agricultural Association](#). The continuing decline of farming in Britain has reasons which are usually economic. There is however also a cultural and spiritual dimension to this problem in the form of a general alienation of society from the land and devaluation of farming as a vocation. The aim of these workshops is to revalue our relationship to the land and try to discover a more spiritual foundation for our work.

View more details [here](#). Please note that anyone connected with farming in Cornwall may be eligible for 55% VTS funding!

New models of farming

Some inspiration from the other side of the Atlantic in some very different and innovative methods of farming:

<http://www.spinfarming.com/>

<http://www.somertontanksfarm.org/>

<http://www.marketgardening.com/wallysmarketgarden>

NGO/Organisation Focus

Navdanya

The relationship between the supposedly developed North and the accordingly 'undeveloped' South is inextricably linked. What we do in the North affects those in the South and vice versa. In this way, the global should perhaps always be considered as local.

Founded by Vandana Shiva, highly esteemed scientist, organic farmer, ecologist, author and environmental activist, Navdanya, means 'the nine crops that represent India's collective source of food security'. Ultimately, Navdanya's work is concerned with **seed**, and in turn food, **sovereignty**.

'The main aim of the Navdanya biodiversity conservation programme is to support local farmers, rescue and conserve crops and plants that are being pushed to extinction and make them available through direct marketing.'

Navdanya is actively involved in the rejuvenation of indigenous knowledge and culture. It has created awareness on the hazards of genetic engineering, defended people's knowledge from biopiracy and food rights in the face of globalisation.

It has its own seed bank and organic farm spread over an area of 20 acres in Ultranchal, north India.'

News

It may not be ground-breaking news to many people reading this newsletter, but the Commission for Rural Communities have released the interesting *State of the Countryside 2007* report.

Here is an excerpt from the press release:

Young people quitting the countryside for a life in the town

Almost 400,000 fewer young people live in rural England compared with 20 years ago, a government commissioned report has revealed.

The [Commission for Rural Communities State of the Countryside Report 2007](#) said that the loss of young people (15-29 year olds) was even more startling as it was set against a rising population generally.

Commission chairman and government rural advocate, Stuart Burgess, described it as a "real threat to the future diversity and sustainability of rural communities".

"The rural population is both older and ageing faster than urban areas," Dr Burgess said.

The number of older people in rural areas is increasing markedly with the net result that the average age is nearly six years higher than in urban areas.

"It suggests a divide between rural and urban areas and is putting a severe strain on the viability of rural schools, the provision of youth services, healthcare and housing," Dr Burgess added.

Key factors effecting the movement of young people away from rural communities are a lack of affordable housing in the countryside combined with low incomes.

And finally...

Calling all mud covered welly-wearers....

I want to make an appeal to each and every one of you bright buttons reading this to come forward and wave your wellies in the air...

We'd like to hear your ideas for future issues of the Organic Futures Newsletter. Perhaps you have some quibbles or a bee in your bonnet about something crucial you feel has been left out or overlooked. Perhaps you'd like to contribute a feature, or maybe you just know of some great events/things happening in your area or further afield that you'd like to shout from the rooftops about.

Whatever it is it'd be great to hear from you. This newsletter evolves as we do and as growers, farmers, readers and writers it is up to all of us to make it a good and crucially, relevant and resource-packed read for all.

Organic Futures...

www.soilassociation.org/organicfutures

- Is a ground-up movement led by young people
- Aims to break down the barriers preventing young people entering the organic food and farming professions
- Provides inspiration, facilitates networking and offers information
- Wants to engage with interested people of all ages and levels of experience
- Wishes to help foster a new, positive culture of farming and growing in Britain

Podcasts

For those of you that have generic MP3 players (or on your PCs), there are [Podcasts](#) available from the Soil Association too!

Classified adverts

If its classified adverts on organic food and farming you're looking for, click [here](#) for an up to date list.

Information

The Soil Association [Library](#) has lots of very useful and interesting articles

Technical information

Lots available on the Soil Association's [Food and Farming](#) pages

News

Get [Today's News](#) from the Soil Association to keep bang up to date with news from home and abroad

Biodynamic agriculture

Our cousins practising biodynamic agriculture and horticulture have an excellent [website](#) detailing courses, events and much more.

Land exchange

Soil Association have added a new land exchange section on their [website](#) – please look at it if you have land to offer or are trying to access land.