



February 2008

“A fertile soil, like an educated mind, is a cumulative process, and with care it is capable of continuous improvement.”

Eliot Coleman

www.soilassociation.org/organicfutures

Welcome

Organic Futures started off as a group of like minded young people at a Soil Association conference. Because they cared a lot about the future of rural Britain and all had deep commitments and connections to organic farming and growing, they thought “we've got to do something!”

About what? The lack of opportunities for young people, access to land, finding the money to start, the whole image and perception of farming as a career. Big issues needing big solutions, at local and national levels. The scale of the problems didn't put that group off – something had to be done.

The group started as friendly e-mail banter, progressed on to irregular newsletters, then more regular newsletters. Over the course of two years or more the e-mail group has grown constantly and the “project” has been attracting more and more attention from those within and outside the organic movement.

I have been pushing hard over the last few months to really launch Organic Futures as a project. I am therefore delighted to announce that 2008 is truly the start of a new chapter in the history of Organic Futures. Big plans are in the pipeline!

I will give more details about progress further on in this newsletter, but please bear with us and be assured that this project is going to grow significantly quite soon. Then we will become active and (hopefully) start to make a real

impact, working towards our goal:

Getting more young people in to organic farming and growing.

Here's to a productive year for Organic Futures and I hope all of you will get involved in some way.

Jonathan Smith

Events

The Future's in your hands

Cirencester, 4th March

After a successful first event, The Red Meat Industry Forum, in conjunction with the NFU and Farmer's Weekly have organised the second younger generation event.

This conference will look at the future of farming, paying particular attention to the next generation of farmers. The invite to the event is attached on the e-mail you have received.

By all accounts last year's event was a huge success – come along to this event if you can. And there's an offer you really can't miss: cost for the day will be £30, but if you bring along a friend you will go FREE! Have you really got any excuses?

Doing it right, doing it better

The Elm Farm conference at Cirencester last December was reported to be well attended by organic producers and enjoyed by all. If you weren't there however you now have the chance to download the [whole conference proceedings](#) from the excellent [Organic Inform](#) website.

In particular take time to read Alan Schofield's 'Holiday Tour'. It certainly puts things in perspective and gives an interesting (and worrying) slant on organic standards and supermarket trade.

The next stage for Organic Futures

I am delighted to announce that Organic Futures has been awarded £4,500 from [UnLtd](#). This is a tremendous boost to the project and will be used for a number of purposes.

Firstly, the Organic Futures website will be overhauled and re-developed entirely, providing resources to inspire and inform new entrants in to organic agriculture and horticulture – plus lots more.

Secondly, I will be doing a tour of agricultural and horticultural colleges, along with staff from the Soil Association's Food and Farming team to spread the word about Organic Futures and discuss pertinent issues with students and staff at the colleges.

Lastly, money will be used to help to put together a larger funding bid to enable the project to grow considerably and start to make a real impact.

A lot will be happening in the next couple of months and you will be kept right up to date of all developments in the project.

Jonathan Smith

The time to train

By Robert Mackey, lecturer in Horticulture at Welsh College of Horticulture

Reading this week's trade press two headlines catch my eye. "UK fails to meet Organic demand" and "Lack of training cause for concern". It is clear to me that these headlines are linked.

Much of our UK grown fruit and vegetable (non-organic) is grown on a huge scale, with a small core of management and technical staff and a heavy reliance on unskilled workers, many from eastern European states, to carry out field work. This supports a system that is heavily mechanised, uses extensive inputs of materials

and abandons much good husbandry such as rotations. And it contributes very little to habitat management and biodiversity. That is not the organic way.

If organic growers are to meet the rising demand for organic food, we need to increase both the number of people working in the sector and their skill and knowledge levels. Indications are that it is not just UK grown organic food that people are looking for, but regional and local grown food. Rising fuel costs, concern over carbon footprints and environmental impact and support for local farmers all point the way to smaller growers producing quality food provided fresh through local markets.



To achieve this we will need a network of small businesses producing food to meet local demand. Growing fruit and vegetables is a complex task requiring a range of skills and knowledge. The people running the businesses have to expect to make a reasonable living out the business, to feed and clothe their families, and pay the inevitable taxes. If the food supply is to be sustainable, businesses that make up the food supply have to be sustainable too.

This new vision creates tremendous opportunities for anyone coming into organic growing. Thirty years ago when I was training to be a vegetable grower I saw diminishing opportunities for setting up a small business, and small local businesses were slowly disappearing as prices dwindled, mechanisation

increased, imports increased and big farms became the norm. Now the tide is turning and the opportunities are back.



Many of our successful organic growers are seasoned campaigners, drawing on years of knowledge, skill and experience to push their business forward. I see many older and more experienced entrants to the industry who are bringing with them experience of non-organic farming systems, or business experience, or a sound knowledge of growing. They are still faced with the challenge of filling the gaps in their skills and knowledge but they are hungry for learning, have experience of life and are determined to succeed. They have chosen to come into organic horticulture as a second career, they are willing to work hard and will succeed and make a vital contribution to the industry

There are massive opportunities for young people in organic horticulture. We must do everything we can to attract them to take up the challenge and seize the chances They are the future of the industry; they will be feeding the nation in years to come.



A younger person will need to learn a wide range of skills to become a successful grower, whether in their own business or within another

small enterprise. That learning can be gained in the workplace, following an apprenticeship, supported by the grower, learning from hands-on experience and understanding what is going on around them. This not a quick process, training takes time and will depend on the opportunities within that workplace. Or they can go to college where they get a chance to gain a wider range of skills and knowledge so they can have some background before starting to work in the industry.

The Welsh College of Horticulture runs full-time and part-time courses in Organic Horticulture. The college is uniquely placed to provide training and education with its own organic farm run on stock-free principles. We aim to provide a broad base of knowledge and skills as part of the course for people interested in a career in Organic Horticulture.

We currently offer a full-time Higher National Diploma (HND) and part-time (one day per week) Higher National Certificate (HNC) courses in Organic Horticulture. The full time students are spending two days a week working on the organic farm, learning not just the principles of organic horticulture but also how to grow crops. This is supported by lectures, seminars and visits. Students are encouraged to read widely and to use the internet for research through Moodle, the colleges "on-line Learning Environment". To learn more about the courses please visit [our website](#).

If you are interested in applying for a course, want further information on courses and support available for students, or would like to discuss further options please contact me at the College on 01352 841000, visit our website www.wcoh.ac.uk or email me on robert.mackey@wcoh.ac.uk

