



# Canterbury Commercial Organic Group

## Newsletter

Issue No 4 : July 1998

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<i>Coming Events</i>	<i>Date</i>
Tour of Only Organics	16 Aug
Trip to Stivens, Wilsons, and Richard Lloyd	17 Oct
Free Seminar on Sustainable Horticulture	11 Aug
Pip and Stonefruit Production Seminar	5 Aug
Barn Dance	8 Aug

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### Organic Meat - or Lack of it?

I recently attended a meeting at AgResearch's Winchmore research station on the organic meat and wool production unit, as its is funding from Meat New Zealand, (formally the Meat Research and Development Council (MRDC)) is up for renewal.

My involvement in this meeting, and subsequent discussions with a number of people in the organic industry brought into sharp focus the sad state of the organic meat market. New Zealand currently has a number of farmers producing certified organic livestock, to what are probably the highest organic livestock standards in the world, certainly leaps ahead of European standards. Plus there are a much greater number of farmers who have uncertified stock that is produced to, or close to, organic standards. On the other side of the world our main agricultural markets, particularly Europe are clamouring for organic meat. Not just small individual retailers but also the big (and they are huge) multiple retailers. They are also talking significant premiums, for example an extra dollar a kg for organic lamb. So far so good; producers with product + market hungry for that product = sale?... think again. We have the bizarre situation that we have a product with a premium price that the market wants but we will not supply.

The problem is the intransigence of the meat processors and exporters. One does have to ask what is going on in the heads of those controlling the industry. Take Heinz Watties in comparison; seven to eight years ago they could clearly see the potential for organic products, in terms of market leavers, premium products, trends in agricultural production etc. They had no growers, so they spent a lot of time and money on extension, research, equipment and help to get growers to convert to organics. They put a lot of effort into cultivating markets - particularly in Asia where there are some notorious 'closed shop' supply chains. They are now reaping the rewards.

The meat industry has an internationally recognised, premium priced product in organic meat, markets desperate for it, and they are doing nothing. They have even had contracts researched for them and put on the table to sign and still no interest. In the fresh vegetable export sector people scramble for such opportunities.

It is not as if meat was doing well at the moment, the news is full of stories about the sad state of the meat trade, so it is even more unbelievable that the meat companies are not taking advantage of a new and lucrative market. A refrain often heard from them is that selling organic meat would imply that there is something wrong with conventional meat. This is rubbish. Watties used organic products as a lever to get their conventional produce onto new shelves.

Also the organic market and conventional markets are separate, those wanting organic product already know there are problems with conventional product, but the purchaser of conventional either does not know or is not concerned.



All this would be rather academic if it were not for the problems this is causing on the ground. There are an increasing number of organic producers, particularly in Canterbury, who have mixed cropping farms, and are growing a range of organic crops, but have no premium outlet for their livestock. The crops are therefore having to carry any extra costs incurred on the livestock side. An outlet for quality organic meat would make a huge difference to many organic mixed cropping farms, which, are considered the ideal type of farm according to organic principals, as opposed to farms with just livestock or crops.

It is situations such as these that the proponents of deregulation of producers boards point to justify their case. While I do not want to discuss the pros and cons of deregulation it is essential that the meat companies wake up and make use of this valuable market. While their past history does not give much hope there are now people selling organic meat domestically and also exporting - mainly because they have shares in a meat company and can force them to process the stock, which they would not do otherwise. With increasing numbers of organic livestock being processed the advantages to the meat companies may become so obvious that they can no longer ignore the potential, and organic farmers may start to reap the benefits. We can only hope.

Merf

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## Bus Trip to Stevens, Wilsons, and Richard Lloyd

This trip will start at Sheryl and Hal Stiven's organic farm near Ashburton, to look at chickens, fruit trees and vegetables. Then on to Geoff and Ira Wilson in Rakia looking at the flour mill and bread making, and finishing at Richard Lloyds in the Old Post Office in Darfield looking at his glass and plastic recycling studio.

The trip is organised by Soil and Health and is on the 17<sup>th</sup> October at 9.00am meeting outside the Trustbank building at Hornby, returning about 5.30pm. Cost \$10 inc. morning and afternoon tea, bring your own lunch. Bookings essential - phone Anne 347 8817.

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## Free Seminar on Sustainable Horticulture

The School of Horticulture at the Christchurch Polytechnic is holding a seminar for growers in the horticultural industry. The Seminar is addressing sustainability issues for Horticulture and the scope of standards and certification schemes to ensure environmentally sound practices.

Concerns are increasing about environmental problems such as nitrate leaching, soil erosion, spray drift and pesticide residues in New Zealand. These environmental problems have a vital effect on the long term sustainability of New Zealand's land based production in that the very resources the production is based on are diminishing, becoming polluted or eroded away. They are also increasingly posing a threat to New Zealand's export opportunities and the country's still widely perceived but rather shaky clean green image. These issues are challenging the land based industries to find appropriate strategies and solutions.

There are a number of attempts from various land based industries to address these problems by setting standards and/or developing a code of practices and encouraging their growers to follow those guidelines. However, the best incentive is still monetary reward. 'What is in for us?', will the growers ask when prompted to produce more environmentally friendly. The long term benefits of sustained sustainability are less tangible than improved marketing opportunities and financial returns. Standards and labels have been developed and aim at supplying those more immediate benefits. The Kiwi Green programme is a good example for such a scheme. It has also proven to be an effective stepping stone for conventional growers to fully certified organic production, either BIO-GRO or Demeter, which provided the organic growers with substantial premiums.

The seminar will draw the connection between the environment and horticulture and explore the options of combining protecting the environment with growers' interests.

Leading into the seminar is a poster exhibition and a nibbles and cheese evening.

The posters are featuring environmental problems caused by or related to horticultural practices and possible solutions. Organisations such as HortResearch, the Canterbury Regional Council, Lincoln University and others will be represented.

The seminar will give representatives from various branches of the horticultural industry the opportu-



nity to address these issues and introduce their existing standards and certification schemes or their possible plans for such. Following this will be an open discussion.

There will be speakers on Sustainable Viticulture, Integrated Fruit Production – Pipfruit, Ron Gall for the Vegetable Growers Federation, Seager Mason for BIO-GRO and possibly Project 98.

The seminar will be held on Tuesday, 11 August 1998. The poster session is time tabled for 6.00 pm and the seminar will begin at 7.00 pm. The venue is the Te Mautaranga Maori building at the City campus of the Christchurch Polytechnic.

**Attendance is free, but registration is required.** Please phone Christchurch Polytechnic's Faculty of Health and Sciences **03 – 3649 074**.

Preceding the seminar we will hold Christchurch Polytechnic's Top Hort Team Competition on the same day. This event is best described as a scaled down version of 'Skellerup's Farmer of the Year' for trainees in the horticultural industry. Interested members of the public are welcome to visit us at our School of Horticulture campus for this event.

Holger Kahl

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## Organic Pip and Stonefruit Production Seminar

A group of ex-conventional apple and stonefruit growers in Central Otago have organised this seminar along with technical facilitator Wayne King. This is an opportunity not to be missed. The seminar will present the current state of knowledge and will include talks from growers, packhouses, exporters, researchers, and a BioGro representative. In addition, Dr Jill McLaren will discuss organic stonefruit production. The Seminar includes

- Reports from three of the grower groups
- Trial Results from Clyde Research
- Report from the Hawks Bay organic growers
- Disease and pest management results
- Resistant cultivars

The seminar will take place at the Centennial Court in Alexandra on August 5<sup>th</sup> at 10am - 5pm. For more information please contact Wayne King on 03 446 8033 or 025 221 5126

**Edited from information supplied by Robyn Patchett and Graham Burnip**

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## Organic Apple Industry Group

Graham Burnip of HortResearch at Lincoln is coordinating the formation of a Canterbury commercial apple growers group who are interested in exploring the potential of becoming certified organic apple growers. Nationally, the number of growers exploring this option are growing. There is great potential for Canterbury growers to work with HortResearch to further develop organic and biological production techniques. Organic apples exported through FreshCo this season received excellent payoffs, rumoured to be \$40 a carton, plus local market and juicing prices have substantial premiums over conventional fruit. The group's contact person is Annabelle Roulston Tel 03 312 8557.

Graham Burnip

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## Factory Tour to Only Organics

Only Organics has been producing organic baby food for export for a number of years from its Christchurch factory. Almeric Cheng, the managing director, has agreed to take a tour round the factory on August 16<sup>th</sup> from 2.00pm to 5.00pm, to be followed up by a meal and drinks at a local hotel. Due to health restrictions there is a limit of 20 places on the tour, so please ring the Patchett household on 03 329 5725 and leave a message listing the number coming, your name and phone number. First in will get the green light so race to that phone!

Robyn Patchett

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## Organic Apples, Cider, Juice Anyone?

The organic apple orchard at Winchmore Research Station is up for lease. Winchmore is situated 10k from Ashburton. Soils are a Lismore stony silt loam which are 300–450 mm deep, stony and free-draining.

It is approx. 4.5ha containing 2500 trees planted during 1986 and 1987. They are mostly Royal Gala but there are also Harolds Red, Braeburn, Oregon Red, and Red Delicious. They are BIO-Grow certified and can be irrigated by border-strip or sprinkler. A cool store and packing shed is also available. Any reasonable offers considered but be quick to beat the chainsaw.



Contact: Colin Clemens 03 302 4809 (ah 03 308 5620)

**Ray Moss**

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## The Green Employment Agency

Ray Wright of the Enterprise Consultancy for Organics (ECO) is currently conducting a study to establish employment opportunities within the organic industry in Canterbury, and is funded through the labour dept. A letter has been sent out to all known organic producers and businesses in the region asking them for their views on the potential of a "Green Employment Agency". If you have not had a letter and would like to find out more please phone Ray Wright on 03 325 1137.

**Ray Wright**

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## Barn Dance

The Organic Garden City Trust has organised a fund raising barn dance with bush band to help support the trusts work. It will be held on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August from 7.30pm to 11.00pm and include an organic supper and organic punch. Alcohol is BYO. There are 100 tickets at \$10 for adults or \$25 for a family. It will be held at the Rising Home Community Hall, Cholmondeley Ave., Opawa. For more details or to make a booking phone Trudy or Sheryl at the Environment Centre on 03-379-2257.

**Ray Wright**

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## Report on the Field Day at the Henderson's

We had a very interesting day looking around Ian and Gita's mixed cropping farm, flour mill and the new dehuller and gravity table for processing the dinkle crop.

What impressed me the most was that he has been cropping his land for around twenty years and he is harvesting the same yields now with no major weed problems evident. How does he do it?

Well there is the acknowledged magic of the biodynamic preparations that enhance the biological activity and storage capacity of the soil. Further, Ian strongly believes that growers have to work out a growing system that suits their farm environment. His farmland is fairly light with dry summer weather so he using a rotation of seven years grass with

three years cropping or four years on the heavier soil. His crops are wheat, lentils, Ryecorn, barley, some tick beans and dinkle. In between these crops he grows green crops to work in.

ryecorn straw is baled for the cows, wheat straw is silage chopped and disced in, then the crop re-growth is enhanced with some lupins, tick beans or oats, giving a good green cover. This maybe grazed as required then working in before the following crop. His average yield for wheat is one and a half ton per acre which compared well with conventional growers nearby.

His only significant weed is chicory - introduced in his pasture mix. Californian thistles have not invaded - his tip for these nasties was that they love the anaerobic conditions resultant from deep ploughing. He has been saving his own hassan barley seed since 1980 which he claims gives him the advantage of a locally adapted type. One crop he is still mastering is tick beans - it is difficult to get good pollination.

His pasture mix includes pawera red clover, kara cocksfoot, fescue, grazing brome sheep's burnett, lucerne chicory and plaitain.

He has sixty cows to chew on the straw and he spreads the resultant dung-straw mixture. He applies lime before ploughing for return to crop.

Dinkle is his crop for the future. This cereal was grown widely a century ago, bakes like wheat with an nutty flavour. It is of great benefit to those allergic to wheat. The new dehuller machine has only recently arrived.

**Robyn Patchett**

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## Organic Weed Control: Part 3

### Soil Nutrients, pH and Structure

Soil nutrients, pH and structure are often neglected when discussing weed control. This is in part because a central aim of organics is to ensure a healthy well balanced soil, so there should not be any problems in this area. Also in a well designed organic system other factors have a bigger effect on weed levels than soil nutrients and structure, however if they move too far from the optimum they can become the overriding cause of a weed problem and unless addressed, other weed control techniques will have limited impact.

Some weeds are able to prosper in soils with nutrient levels or pH that are sub-optimal for, or even



adversely effect, crops. For example day nettle and hemp nettle thrive in acid soils - hence their appearance under pine trees. It is this relationship which give rise to the 'folk law' in organic circles that you can tell a lot about a soil from the weeds/plants growing there. While there is considerable truth in this, and it is valuable as a field guide, it is no alternative for a good soil test. For a detailed list of indicator plants 'Organic Farming' by Nicolas Lampkin p165 is an excellent reference. Also while It is important to have sufficient levels of nutrients in a soil, the ratio between nutrients particularly the major nutrients is also important. The ratio of potassium and calcium to magnesium is widely recognised as being important, as it can lead to hypomagnesaemia in dairy cattle for example. Sections of the organic movement, particularly some American consultants, place considerable emphasis on ensuring that the majority of soil nutrients are in the correct ratios, for example Neil Kinsey who has written a book called Hands on Agronomy. Soil and plant nutrition is a very large subject however, and is beyond the scope of this article. Slightly sub-optimal nutrient and pH levels can favour some weeds but rarely to the extent that it becomes the overriding cause of weed problems. Widely sub-optimal nutrient levels can cause weeds to overrun crops. In both cases soil analysis and remedial nutrient applications is required. Regular (at least every three years) soil analysis should be taken to ensure that such conditions are prevented. There are a number of soil analysis labs aimed at both conventional and organic systems, that operate a variety of soil analyses, of various levels of detail, and based on various philosophies of soil and plant nutrition. These advertise in a range of magazines.

The relation of soil structure and weeds is similar to nutrients in that sub-optimal conditions will not help, but are rarely the overriding cause of problems. Organic farms should be maintaining a good soil structure anyway. One group of problem weeds that has a strong correlation to soil structure are those which spread by underground stems or roots, such as Californian thistle. These underground structures are often much larger than crop roots and such weeds can prosper and out compete crops in conditions that adversely effect crops such as anaerobic and compacted conditions including cultivation pans. Poor structure, compaction and cultivation pans can also lead to waterlogged soil which can promote damp loving weeds such as buttercups. Organic matter, preferably with a high(er) carbon : nitrogen ratio: is required to relieve soil structure problems in the long term. In the short term, cultivations can help but most cultivations adversely effect soil structure long term. Sub

soiling (deep ripping) can relieve compaction and cultivation pans. Subsoiling must be done at the correct soil moisture level of moderately dry, if it is done when the soil is too wet it will cause more damage, and if too dry it will have limited effect. Friable soils such as sands can be sub-soiled over a wider range of moisture than cohesive soils such as clay. The only effective way to tell if soil moisture is correct is to dig a hole where the implement has passed and visually check for good fracturing and the absence of smearing or compacting. Anaerobic layers are most frequently created by ploughing in crop residues. Alternatives include surface cultivations, grazing with stock, and shallow ploughing. No/zero till techniques have shown that providing surface trash will not impede drilling or pre/post emergence weed control, leaving residues on the surface has considerable advantage in terms of soil structure. Ploughing therefore, is not essential, is frequently detrimental and should be avoided where possible.

## Crop and Pasture Choice

Crop and pasture choice is also often overlooked in relation to organic weed control, partly as they play a minor role and are often constrained by market outlets. However the cumulative effects of minor improvements to secondary weed control factors can add up to a considerable overall reduction in weed problems.

Pasture species can have a major effect on weeds. The traditional New Zealand pasture of ryegrass and white clover, while quick to establish it is a poor competitor, particularly in dry summer conditions as ryegrass is shallow rooted. It is also the grass most susceptible to grass grub, plus the endophytes which make it more resistant, also make it toxic to stock! Other grasses, such as timothy, cocksfoot, and fescue, while slower to establish are deeper rooting, more competitive and non-toxic to stock. Thistles are potentially a major pasture weed in organics, particularly Californian thistle. These deep rooting plants are able to access moisture and nutrients beyond the reach of grasses and white clovers - they remain green even while the pasture around them is dead. Palatable species that can complete with them such as chicory and Lucerne, which have deep roots, can dramatically reduce their numbers. They also provide feed when grass has stopped growing in dry conditions. It is also important to ensure that annual thistles do not go to seed, and strategic mowing or rousing just before flowering is vital. Perennial thistles generally produce very little viable seed, however mowing just before flowering, when their root reserves are at their lowest, will severely set them back, especially if regrowth is cut also.



For crops: where there is leeway in the choice of crops and or cultivars, qualities to aim for are; rapid establishment and vigorous growth, to out compete weeds, more prostrate and leafy types to smother weeds, and long straw types in cereals to shade out weeds. Cultivars also need to be well matched to the climate and soil types. A 10% increase in the sowing rate is recommended to increase the competitive effect of the crop and also to compensate for losses due to mechanical weed control.

The use of crop mixtures when possible is very valuable, and is gaining increasing popularity especially in Europe and the States. The mix can be of different cultivars of the same crop, or different crops. Benefits gained beyond better weed control include reduced pest and particularly disease levels, and greater production (which can be up to 20%) than if the same area was grown with the crops separated.

So while soil conditions and crop choice are less critical parts of organic weed management they are still important and when added up can contribute significantly to weed management.

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### Canterbury Commercial Organics Group - Newsletter

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