

600,000 new entrants

Sjoerd Wartena, founder of Terre de liens in France, highlights the problems ahead for the agricultural sector and the urgent need to recruit young farmers and growers to ensure the survival of organic and family farms



Where will the next generation of farmers come from when schools and communities do little to inspire future farmers?

I was given a copy of the winter 2014 Organic Farming Magazine by Rachel Harries, who represents the Soil Association in the Access to land for local sustainable agriculture working group. I was surprised by the alarming remark in the editorial regarding the Government's estimate of the need of as many as 600,000 new entrants over the next 10 years to secure the future of farming.

Just three per cent of British farmers are less than 35 years old, so this practically means the end of family farming in the UK in a few years' time. Yes, there is a place in the countryside for these new farmers, but let us be serious

about the conditions needed to drive to such a major change in mentality and governance.

Our working group is coordinating European initiatives to help young farmers, mostly from non-agricultural backgrounds to find land and start a sustainable way of farming that corresponds to their social surroundings.

The initiatives of organisations such as Terre de liens in France, the Young Farmers' Coalition in the USA, and Terra en Vue in Belgium are citizen-led laboratories, experiencing connections between people and the land, town and country people, food and landscape, and between

farming and artisans.

Only intense and wide support will create the circumstances capable of forming a coalition of change that forces political decisions in another direction.

We need thousands of initiatives like the Soil Association's Future Growers Scheme to bring more balance in agricultural development. Losing organic and smallholder farming is a disaster in Europe and the USA, but it will be a social nuclear bomb in the other continents.

Sjoerd Wartena is from Terre de liens and Access to Land for Community Connected Farming

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Joining a farm walk

Seeing a short article in the Western Mail about a farm walk around a newly certified organic farm, my husband and I were intrigued to visit. Our main interest was in the organic status of the farm, as we grow our own produce organically and supplement our efforts with the purchase of organic foods from local farmers' markets.

Not knowing what to expect we were warmly welcomed by the farmer and his wife. The visit was very well planned and informative. Even though we are not familiar with the science of farming, the delivery from the farmer and his colleague was clear. Throughout the visit farmers shared their knowledge and experiences. Questions were asked and issues explored as we toured the farm. It was delightful to see that the animals are very well cared for, looking healthy and productive. There is close attention given to detail thereby pre-empting problems. Cleanliness was highlighted as vital at every step. The wellbeing of each animal is given priority with great care given to preventing or alleviating any infections. Interesting anecdotes were shared about the merits of homeopathy for certain ailments. All in all a few hours very well spent. Living in a rural county it was encouraging to witness good practice with high animal welfare standards. Thank you.

Margaret and Ronald Crennell



A full programme of farm walks is planned for 2015

This reader wins a bottle of Juniper Green Organic Gin (see right)

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Professor Carlo Leifert led the nutritional research at Newcastle University

Scientific proof

I read with very considerable disquiet statements such as ‘proves what we knew all along’ and ‘confirm what most of us are sure is true’ in both the editorial and Peter Melchett’s opinion piece, regarding the Newcastle University metastudy of the nutritional quality of organic and non-organic food (in *Organic Farming Magazine* issue 116). Organic agriculture is fundamentally a ‘scientific’ endeavour, in that science is used to implement its ethical norms. However, statements, such as the above, are unscientific, indeed they are beliefs, i.e. an acceptance that something is true without proof. They are thus the antithesis of science and therefore belong to religion. If organic agriculture wishes to remain within the scientific fold rather than become a religion, I suggest it should adhere to a more secular and scientific discourse than a religious one.

The statements also do injustice to the paper’s authors, in that if the central thesis of the paper is considered to be so self-evident and axiomatic that its truth is undeniable, then it has clearly been a waste of their time ‘proving’ the obvious. The corollary to this is if organic agriculture is so obviously better, then why bother with science? I think this is a road few within organics actually wish to go down.

Charles Merfield

Organic Agronomic Research and Consulting, New Zealand

Thank you very much for taking the trouble to write in response to my opinion piece and our other coverage of the Newcastle University meta-analysis on nutritional quality. Of course I and my colleagues completely agree with you about the importance of scientific evidence and the respect we should have for that. However, if I have read your letter correctly, I think we fundamentally disagree if you are suggesting that science is the only thing that should guide our actions in the organic movement.

First, obviously, many of the positions we take are unashamedly moral, for example that farm animals should have a good life. The science can inform moral choices, but not determine them. Then there are precautionary decisions we make in the face of uncertain evidence, which need reviewing as the evidence mounts. We have taken decisions on moral

grounds, like banning the feeding of cows’ brains to other cattle, with no scientific evidence (of course much emerged later).

However, with the Newcastle nutritional research, the situation was different. First, general agricultural science tells us that the level in crops of certain nutritionally beneficial compounds, in particular antioxidants, is largely controlled by the level of nitrogen fertiliser supplied to the crop. It is therefore known, in general terms, that there will be more of some beneficial nutrients in organic crops, which are grown with lower levels of nitrogen, than with non-organic crops. All previous meta-analyses, by Brant et al at Newcastle, the French Food Standards Agency, by Stanford University, and for the UK Food Standards Agency, had all shown that there were nutritional differences between organic and non-organic food.

The difference between those previous studies were that some found these differences to be statistically significant (Brant et al and the French Food Standards Agency) and some found the differences not to be significant (Stanford and UK Food Standards Agency). The latest Newcastle research, which is more extensive and more rigorous, and which had far more studies to work with, because about half the individual research papers had been published since the UK Food Standards Agency research, simply underscores and extends the existing evidence. Now that there are far more papers to include in a meta-analysis, it is not surprising that the conclusion was that there are statistically significant differences between organic and non-organic food. In these circumstances, while we have always been clear that the scientific evidence prior to the Newcastle research was not definitive, I really do not think that it was wrong for us to say that we believed something to be the case even if the science was not yet definitive.

Finally, I think it is clear that while there is scientific controversy about two possible outcomes, even if people believe one side or the other, it is extremely important that more scientific research, and particularly the gold standard of meta-analysis where it is possible, is applied with the aim of answering the question definitively.

Peter Melchett, Director of Policy at the Soil Association