

Connecting Organic – Bejo conference

In September I was, thanks to Elsoms Seeds, one of a group of organic growers flown over to visit the Bejo headquarters at Warmenhuizen in the Netherlands for their annual open days. This was more than just a chance to visit their always impressive organic variety demonstration plots, for this year they also held an organic conference with more than 200 delegates from 25 countries. It is testament to Bejo's commitment to the organic sector that they chose to host 'Connecting Organic.' Although organic seed is still only 5% of their total seed business, it is clearly important to the company, and their organic trade continues to grow. They are working on 32 organic crops and currently have 140 varieties available as organic seed. They have trial sites in the Netherlands, Italy and Poland, evaluating broad field resistance, while seed production is also carried out in France, New Zealand and the USA. They are proud of the white coating they have introduced exclusively for organic seeds, which makes the seed visible in the soil but provides a potential vehicle for microbial growth enhancers, which they are currently developing.

Cultivation

Derk van Balen, a farm systems researcher at Applied Plant Research (PPO) which is part of Wageningen University, spoke about non-inversion tillage in organic farming systems. He outlined the synergy between conservation agriculture and the IFOAM principles. Most of the experience of it is in arable crops, not vegetables. Europe lags behind the USA and the rest of the world and while interest in it is growing the practicalities of carrying it out in large-scale vegetable production are less understood. A trial was started in 2009 at Lelystad on three systems:

- A standard 25cm autumn ploughing.
- Non-inversion tillage with seedbed preparation and de-compaction.
- Minimum tillage – seedbed preparation and direct drilling.

It uses a controlled traffic system (GPS guided) on 3.15m tramlines (more than 3.5m is not allowed on the roads!) with a rotation of potatoes, grass/clover, white cabbage, spring wheat, carrots and peas. Specialist equipment is being developed and trialled separately prior to use. A roller-crimper is used in one direction followed by drilling. PPO are monitoring root structures, greenhouse gas emissions, water infiltration and soil compaction. The trial is in its early stages. Results so far indicate that crop development differs between treatments but that there are almost no differences in overall yield. There is more available N in the ploughed rotation than the min-till and the ploughed soil warms up easier, but loses its warmth at night. There have been some carrot germination problems in the min-till. The non-inversion treated ground has suffered from soil compaction at 15-20cm depth but is more moist in the spring, while mice have been a problem in the spring wheat. He identified the challenges they have encountered, growing vegetables in conservation agriculture:

- Difficulty of sowing into stubbles, especially for onions and carrots.
- Cultivation of clover in spring before sowing carrots.
- Weed control in carrots and onions difficult due to crop residues.
- Bean fly in onions (attracted by manure).
- Application of manure may lead to fouling of the plants.
- Allelopathic properties of cover crops can effect cash crops.

He suggested that perhaps we need to breed varieties that have root systems that will develop in the upper 20cm and to overcome the problems of slow early growth. New techniques need to be developed for direct seeding of small-seeded crops. The work is very necessary and relevant, but at this early stage I felt that it raised more questions than answers.

Leguminous crops

Derk van Balen also presented work carried out at the Louis Bolk Institute on the direct application to vegetable crops of leguminous mowings from (for example) grass/clover leys and lucerne. The experiment compared the use of fresh lucerne, lucerne silage, fresh grass/clover and chicken manure. The highest yields of spinach resulted from the fresh lucerne and the fresh grass/clover applications. He concluded that there may be potential for developing strip tillage systems, whereby mowings from a legume strip are transferred directly to a crop grown in an adjacent strip. One limitation is that the system is not suitable for early crops, as you have to wait until June to harvest the legume.

The market for organic vegetables in Germany

Günter Gellert is the vegetable category manager at the snappily titled Vermarktungsgesellschaft Biolan Schleswig-Holstein mbh & Co.K. in northern Germany and gave a presentation based on 20 years of experience of marketing organic produce.

The German organic market has not been hit by recession, unlike that in the UK. It, and with it the total organic area and number of organic farms, continues to rise. With an annual turnover of €5.8 billion Germany is the major market for organic vegetables in Europe. On average Germans spend €70 per year on organic food, more than the Dutch but less than the Danes, who spend €132 each. Organic farming accounts for 5.7% of agricultural land with a target of 20% mentioned in some reports. 11,500ha of organic vegetables are grown, around 10% of the total vegetable area. The most important crop by area is carrots (c.1400ha). The next biggest crop is asparagus with 600 ha. Another difference is that there are a number of different certifiers, some say too many, with no dominant body. The new EU organic logo is welcomed as it will help to provide clarity to the consumer.

The market is organised differently to the UK, organic goods being present in all food outlets. The three most important types of outlet are the discounters (e.g. Aldi and Lidl), the 'full-range trader' (i.e. supermarkets) and the specialist wholefood shops, including wholefood supermarkets (e.g. Alnatura). In recent years wholefood stores have decreased significantly with the rise of the wholefood supermarkets. However they have played an important role in the development of the market, for instance by paving the way for squashes to become a mainstream vegetable in the supermarkets.

Taking carrots to illustrate the organic vegetable market - 45% of those sold domestically are of German origin, with 32% from the Netherlands and 16% from Israel. The quantities sold in 2010 were 13% up on 2009, with 22% of total market share (20% in 2009). This equates to a 4% increase in turnover, though the average prices to the consumer have fallen from €1.16 in 2009 to €1.07/kg in 2010. In the discounters organic carrots sell for €0.60 to 0.80 /kg, leading to price wars with the result that there is now very little difference between organic and conventional prices. Many Aldi stores are only offering organic carrots. The supermarket price is €0.90 to €1.20/kg and the organic supermarkets and weekly markets sell at €1.10 to €1.60/kg. The packer price is €0.49 to €0.60/kg with the ex-farm price €0.20 to 0.25/kg, which is better than in 2009 but not good enough!

Trend watching

Anneke Ammerlaan is a well-known Dutch food writer and trend-spotter, editor of a consumer magazine on organic food, and the author/producer of over 40 best-selling cookbooks. She delivered an entertaining and thought-provoking presentation on The new era of organic: Trends and choices. She distinguished between trends and fads. A trend is 'dictated' by world drivers such as politics, economy and culture, is for everybody and will last for at least ten years. A fad is the following of a fashion, often initiated by 'influentials' such as celebrities and journalists, is a consumer choice and lasts a few seasons at the most. Growing trends are care and ethics, changing trends are health and food safety. Convenience is, she says, a fading trend. Current fads are salt reduction, heirloom vegetables and foams. Fads that have had their day include the Atkins diet and deep-frying food in nitrogen. Trends get adopted over time from innovators and are passed on to the majority and then to the laggards. With time the authenticity diminishes (sound familiar?). She identified two rules: 1) every trend has a countertrend, and 2) the future is in the past - with knowledge of the past, insight into the future is many times easier.

Reassuringly perhaps, she calls organic a trend and not a fad, but the drivers vary according to the country. In the UK it is a trend of the middle class and higher income groups with the supermarket the main driver and the Soil Association the most influential group. In the Netherlands it has an environmentalist base and is more about a 'mentality group', and the health food store is the driver.

The organic movement has developed from a reaction to chemical agriculture and should embrace the Slow Food movement. Taste and quality are the new criteria, attracting new non-ideological

buyers and new items, such as Italian products and heirloom vegetables. Organic has become a prerequisite for many premium quality products. The organic brand should emphasise the unconditional care of the producer for his/her product - "What is the value of organic when the growing of the produce is indifferent, when the ingredients are processed to an average industrial product and products travel all over the world?" There is a trend for the producer to become the personal guarantee of quality (celebrity producer) and for closer links to the consumer. Food and food production are returning to the heart of our cultural heritage. Don't under-estimate the power of the foodie, she suggested. Biodiversity is on the foodies' menu. Their current fad is for bitter vegetables like chicory. Cavalo nero, coloured vegetables and fresh pulses are other foodie fads.

"Jamie Oliver your time is over - it is the producer who will be leading the next 10-50 years," according to Anneke Ammerlaan. Food service (restaurants etc.) is one of the main ways of new ideas being introduced, so keep your eye on them. She says that we are moving away from a Mediterranean diet towards a Nordic one. As a result of this tomatoes, courgettes, peppers, olive oil, pasta, wine will be 'out'. UK growers may be pleased to know that the list of 'in' products include (at least in her opinion) cabbage, beetroot and carrots. Organic is a lasting trend, she concluded, but the values of organic will change. The new organic consumer wants a premium quality product.

Phil Sumption

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