

Organic Research Centre Open Day, Wakelyns Agroforestry – June 18th

Wakelyns is not only the base for Martin Wolfe's innovative agroforestry system (see OG#5 for more details) but is also the Suffolk outpost of The Organic Research Centre – Elm Farm. The annual open day included talks from ORC staff, local farmers and others on farm businesses and organic markets, reducing energy and emissions on farm and an opportunity to see innovative research projects on fertility building and wheat breeding.

A croissant and coffee made a very civilised welcome to Wakelyns on a glorious sunny June day. A nice change to the ubiquitous Duchy Originals! Wakelyns is truly an oasis in the arable desert of rural East Anglia and it was a pleasure to see the maturing of Martin Wolfe's agroforestry system.

Growers (and farmers) have their say

After the croissants, we all gathered inside to hear local organic farmers and growers 'have their say'. First up was John Sanderson of South Elmham Hall. Farming 450 acres of mixed arable, sheep and a beef suckler herd, a third of which is organic, John explained how the farm had diversified. The farm has three areas of ancient monument, which were attracting a number of visitors. Starting off by putting in car parks and paths it was soon realised that the visitors were an untapped resource. A barn was converted into a visitor centre which now has a restaurant using local produce, organic where possible, with a full-time chef. Visitors asked if the produce was organic, and this prompted the conversion.

Chris Negus of Breckland Organics at Church Farm, Shropham, outlined their journey from large-scale growers of conventional carrots and parsnips supplying retailers to organic growers with their own box scheme. The journey started when they were asked by the retailers to supply organic carrots and parsnips nine years ago. They were growing on other land as well as their own and decided that rather than try to find land with existing organic status they would convert their own farm. Once they started conversion they fell victims to the supermarkets' rationalisation of suppliers and their contracts were finished. This blow led to them selling the business but they retained the land, which was then rented out. Eventually they took the plunge to start their own box scheme on the 515-acre farm. The farm comprises 250 acres of arable land, 70 acres of permanent pasture, 15 acres reservoir/nature reserve, 30 acres woodland and 150 acres which is let for free-range chicken production. The whole farm is wildlife rich. It was under Countryside Stewardship and is now signed up to the OELS and HLS schemes. Conversion was completed in October 2008. Vegetable cropping has increased from 5 acres in 2007 to 75 in 2009. This includes 12 acres of carrots, 0.5 acres parsnips, 35 acres brassicas, 13 acres leeks and 6 acres sweetcorn. The rotation

is 3-4 years of cropping and then fertility-building, though they are still discovering the right rotation to fit the farms fertility 'holding' capacity. The arable land is light and irrigated from the River Thet. Chicken manure is used from the chicken enterprise. Companion planting with birdsfoot trefoil in the module is practised with the brassicas. They have seen tangible improvements in soil quality after the fertility-building leys, with fields previously thought of as not cultivable when wet now workable and productive.

Andrew Charlton, of Abacus Organic Associates and an organic farmer at Hedley Poplar Farm, chose not to talk about his farm but set out his agenda for the future, formulated during long hours on the tractor.

- 1). More co-operation. Organic farms are often physically isolated and run the risk of becoming inefficient (e.g. lacking specialist kit). There may be opportunities for organic and conventional farmers to work together. For example, organic cereal crops are often ready earlier and drilling tends to be later.
- 2). Comprehensive organic resource. There are great research facilities in the East of England but often they are not interested in organics. There is a need to enthuse and engage potential converters.
- 3). Transition – the long game. Organic farmers should get involved. Most towns in the East of England have a transition group and food is often central to that.
- 4). An organic farming turnkey solution. Many would like to be part of the organic farming movement but might need nurturing. Andrew talked about Speedwell Farming Ltd., (which launched on the 9th July) of which he is a director, and described it as the first organic contract farming business. www.speedwellfarming.co.uk

Agrarian Renaissance

Tim Waygood talked about Agrarian Renaissance which he founded 18 months ago. Its purpose is to combine elements of organic farming, permaculture, biodynamics, care farming and youth socialisation into a replicable model that can transform a farm into a site where reconnection of people with land and food takes place. The idea is to replicate the success of Church Farm, Ardeley near Stevenage, where a rural community enterprise hub has been set-up.

The organic arable market

Andrew Trump of Organic Arable talked about the volatility of the market and the lack of control which comes from being linked with the conventional market. This he likened to 'hanging on to the tiger's tail'. Farmers should seek opportunities to de-couple sales from the commodity markets by building relationships e.g. with livestock producers and millers.

EASI

Laurence Smith (ORC-EF) gave an update on the Energy, Emissions, Ecology and Agricultural System Integration (EASI) programme. Audit reports have been produced from four pilot farms outlining energy and emission hotspots, energy input and output figures and recommendations on how to make improvements. Some ideas he gave where improvements could be made included;

- Heat accumulators for Aga stoves (domestic energy use was often high)
- Improvements to farm vehicle use efficiency through attention to tyre pressures and lowering revs.
- Improving grain drying and storage.
- Saving energy through reducing energy-intensive operations such as de-stoning.

Talking about the potential for renewable energy on farms, Laurence stated that farm woodlands are an underutilised resource. The use of woodfuel systems can encourage the maintenance of woodland and also provide an income (£50-70/t for well-seasoned wood). Anaerobic digestion has potential for increasing the efficiency of slurry management and the digestate can make a good fertiliser, but capital cost is still a major issue. Connection to the grid is still difficult in some areas. RDPE funding is currently available though there is still a need for more grant funding. On farm wind turbines are possible where average windspeeds are above 5m/s. There is a windspeed database on www.berr.gov.uk

Wakelyns tour

After a very nice organic and locally sourced lunch, we all jumped on to trailers for a 'farm walk' and a chance to see the agroforestry system in action. Sandwiched in between the rows of trees were various trials on wheat populations, fertility-building mixtures (see OG#7) and novel cereals.

Phil Sumption



Martin Wolfe at Wakelyns

Photo: Phil Sumption





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