

Grower profile: Andy Dibben of The Community Farm

I moved from livestock farming into organic vegetable production about five years ago and remember thinking that growing vegetables seemed a lot easier, were less stressful and demanded less of my time than livestock farming. I certainly never arrived at work to find all of my carrots running down the main road - almost a weekly occurrence when I had a flock of rare breed sheep!

I found myself as the tractor driver at The Better Food Company's growing site just south of Bristol in the Chew Valley. When I arrived in May 2010, plans were already in place to sell the growing and wholesale operation to the customer base which would, in turn form the CSA project. I very

quickly realised that this was a different level of veg production - a lot more professional and productive. After what I can only describe as a turbo apprenticeship in growing under both Ben Raskin and Phil Haughton, eight months later I was able to take over the head grower's position. It was at this time that we passed ownership of the business over to our members, currently around 500, and taking on the name of "The Community Farm."

We are a not-for-profit company committed to supplying a full range of locally grown produce as well as offering a suitable environment for education, therapy and rehabilitation to a wide range of different local groups. We currently farm on 23 acres but we have an additional 17 acres into which we are slowly expanding, aiming to grow a full range of field crops, soft fruit and protected crops. Our trade is mainly focused into Bristol and consists of approx. 400 weekly boxes and wholesale customers in the form of pubs, restaurants, schools and wedding venues. We also supply our former owners, The Better Food Company, who own two ethical supermarkets in Bristol. This range of outlets enables us to target produce where it will be most appreciated and also to minimise waste.



Andy Dibben, inspiring the next generation

The land consists of a lovely deep layer of sandy loam saddling a hill overlooking a reservoir. There are stunning views from the farm in most directions and together with our close proximity to both Bristol and Bath these assets have helped us entice the public onto the farm. The nature of our soil gives us many advantages in the form of very good drainage allowing us to get out on the land very quickly in spring or after rain. We can achieve a deep tilth very easily, which means we can grow some great parsnips and carrots when we can keep the root fly off them.

The soil structure has also lent itself to a no plough policy, except when breaking

leys, and the chosen method of preparing land is with a deep cultivator, followed by a succession of rolling and ever decreasing harrows. We use a small power harrow where direct sowing is planned or with clods that prove stubborn to break down. Like everything in life, the benefits of a sandy soil come with an equal number of negatives, and it has quickly become apparent that we are having problems holding onto the nutrients, leaching out apparently very quickly. For this reason we are trying to use green manures as much as possible to maintain these nutrients between crops and we are also trying to use a seven-year rotation allowing three fertility-building years. The light soil also lends itself to capping and erosion.



Bringing in the spuds

Other challenges include couch grass, but the pigs are helping us cure that problem and leek moth and carrot root fly which are demanding more and more meshing. The local deer population is large and unfortunately, the rabbits have moved in this year as well.

Off the field, the logistics and expense of keeping three vans constantly full and on the road is always challenging. The growing team consists of myself, a full time worker and our Soil Association apprentice John English who started off as a very committed volunteer. Volunteering is a big part of what goes on at the farm and absolutely intrinsic to our growing. We have up to 12 volunteers from Monday to Friday, who last year put in the



The squash harvest

hourly equivalent of a full time worker. The weekly regulars just come along and muck in with whatever the jobs are for that day, but we also encourage them to take on areas of responsibility. For example we have a 130 m bed of asparagus purely managed by volunteers and at least 2/3 of our potato harvesting last year was manned by volunteers on the harvester.

In addition to the regular volunteers, we organise themed days for volunteers at the weekend which take place once a month during the growing season. These have been attracting 25-30 people per event, which is great for big jobs like squash harvesting, carrot weeding and apple tree planting.

My first year heading up a growing operation involved with community based agriculture has left me completely convinced of the power of the land to build communities and reinvigorate people who have lost their way in life. I start this season aware of how much more I have to learn about growing but excited by the challenge.



Take the Flour Back

On the 27th May, over 400 people travelled from France and from all over the UK to meet in Rothamsted Park in Harpenden, Hertfordshire to oppose the two-year open-air trial of GM wheat, funded by Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). The crop has been created by inserting synthetically produced genes, one of which, in Rothamsted Research's application to Defra, was described as being similar to that of a cow. It also contains an antibiotic resistant marker gene, used in an earlier laboratory stage to identify those plants taken on the new genes. The crop is designed to emit the aphid alarm pheromone (E)- β -farnesene which aphids give out when under attack, thus repelling them and attracting aphid predators. Although largely self-pollinating, there is a small risk that wheat could cross-pollinate in this open-air trial.

Farmers, growers (including OGA members), bakers and others concerned about this trial joined together under a large oak tree to share real bread and conversation. We heard from the band Seize the Day and a number of speakers who oppose GM and this trial in particular.

The wheat farmer

Peter Lundgren, a conventional wheat grower in Lincolnshire, was the first to speak, "I'm one of the beneficiaries, a commercial wheat farmer and user of agrochemicals". But he said that this crop trial



was irresponsible and irrelevant as spring wheat only accounts for 1% of wheat grown in the UK. He also said that aphids are rarely a problem and can be treated easily and cheaply with a pesticide that does not kill bees and other beneficial insects. The answer was using organic options and relying on natural predation of aphids, knowledge developed at Rothamsted. He stressed that scientists are looking at something he doesn't need.

Lawrence Woodward

The next speaker was Lawrence Woodward, late of the Organic Research Centre but now involved in Citizens concerned about GM, saying it was a shame that the concerns and worries about this trial were not addressed before it was planted. He expressed admiration for the Take the Flour Back campaign and what they have achieved by putting the GM debate back on the public agenda. He went on to say organic farmers don't have problems with aphids or barley yellow dwarf virus and wondered whether the scientists involved in this trial had referred back to previous work done at Rothamsted Research before gaining funding, as this found that hedgerows and field margins that supported aphid predators kept aphids in check. Lawrence said that the view of GM was embedded in research funders and regulators like the Food Standards Agency, and there is no research about the impacts of these synthetic genes on human health. In their risk assessment Rothamsted say the crop will be destroyed anyway but in the USA we have seen how contamination can happen in the case of GM rice. Lawrence said that Take the Flour Back campaign was not enough, that we need engage the public in a number of ways whether by direct action or writing to your MP. Lawrence said he wouldn't be attempting to trash the trial, he considered it to be of small contamination risk and not worth alienating the public. We had achieved the moral high ground and suggested we walk round, wave banners and walk away.

Local farmer

Local farmer Richard Higgins from Well End Permaculture talked of the excellent work of organic farming pioneer Albert Howard