

# A ground-up solution to cropping issues

An EU-backed project will help develop a new cropping system for Irish organic producers, reports **Grace Maher**



A CRITICISM of research conducted in most sectors is that information has a tendency to stay exactly where it is generated and not trickle down to the end users.

In order to reduce this problem in agriculture, the EU Commission launched a programme in 2012 called the European Innovation Partnership, or EIP-Agri for short.

EIP aims to bring farmers, researchers, organisations and industry together to work on

specific problems and to develop solutions in a faster manner.

Last year the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, allocated funding of €59m to fund EIP Operational Groups working on projects that contribute to Rural Development Priorities.

The first 13 Irish EIP-Agri projects were selected following a competitive application process.

In line with rural development priorities there are two streams for

funding. The first stream focuses on issues such as farm viability, economic performance, sustainable forest management, and innovative technologies.

The second stream is focused on challenges related to environmental, biodiversity and climate change issues.

One of the successful projects is called Maximizing Organic Production Systems, and the lead applicant on the project is Gillian Westbrook from the Irish Organic Association (formerly called IOFGA).

“The primary goal of this project is to design a cropping system to enable 11 organic growers to work

collaboratively to supply growing market demands,” she explained.

“This will reduce dependence on imported organic horticultural products and shorten the supply chain here in Ireland. Some growers certified by the Irish Organic Association came to us and identified this issue.

“We decided to form an Operational Group, apply for funding under the EIP-Agri to see if we can find a solution to this challenge.”

Organic farming accounts for just under 2pc of utilisable agricultural land in this country, and only a very small body of research has been carried out on organic farming practices.

This three-year will develop a good picture of organic horticultural production which can then be shared with interested parties.

The National Rural Network (NRN) have been tasked with following the progress of EIP projects here, assisting with dissemination and linking potential partners together.

This innovative approach to research is extremely useful for farmers who want to look at practical ways in which to address challenges which arise at farm level.

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## ‘We need detailed analysis of what is going on at farm level’

GRACE MAHER

**P**ADRAIG FAHY and Una Ni Bhroin started Beechlawn Organic Farm in 2003 on the outskirts of Ballinasloe, Co Galway.

The couple met in the Organic College at Dromcollogher, Co Limerick and decided to move back to Galway and grow organic vegetables on Padraig’s family farm.

They started out slowly, developing the business gradually. They now have 62ac of land, some of which is owned and the rest rented.

Almost 30 acres are in crop production, with some land under grass and the remainder in conversion to organic production.

Beechlawn employs 14 people year-round, and up to 20 in the summertime.

They supply retailers, wholesalers, independent stores and businesses in Galway, Clare and Dublin. They also have a web-shop and operate a home delivery service for customers wishing to source fruit and vegetables direct.

Padraig approached Gillian Westbrook from the Irish Organic Association, outlining what he saw as a growing market for organic horticulture crops and issues with supplying that market.

On the back of that initial conversation, an EIP Operational Group was formed with other growers, agronomists and data collectors, to see if these issues could be explored in greater detail under the EIP-Agri programme.

“We are delighted that this project has been successful in receiving funding, it is very exciting for me as a grower to have that level of additional support,” says Padraig.

“One of the key aims is to examine the market in detail, but it is just as important to explore other issues such as agronomy, soil analysis, composting, green manures — all of which are really practical and are part of this project.

“We need to analyse what is going on at farm level to improve production, yields and quality. I am really keen to learn how to ensure crops will last for the season; some crops I have



Padraig Fahy and his wife Una grow 30ac of organic vegetables on their farm in east Galway

on farm for 120 days, some for 220 days so researching how to get the best out of varieties and crops is really important for me as a producer.

“Sometimes you can be working in isolation, and it is great to know that all the members of the Operational Group will be working with a shared purpose and common goal to develop the organic horticulture market here in Ireland over the next three years.”

### Climate conditions

The project will also capture key variables impacting production on farm environmental climatic conditions, such as humidity, rainfall and temperature.

Over the years Padraig has pulled back from growing some crops such as main crop carrots, potatoes and onions, which he now sources from other growers around the country who are growing on more suitable land conditions.

Beechlawn cannot supply all the crops that they require, so working with other growers is important.

Padraig sees this project as a further opportunity to “build strong relationships with other producers and widen the network of growers around the country as we work together, sharing information and knowledge”.

He adds: “Communicating on a regular basis will identify gaps of supply and hopefully increase the availability of some crops as we move towards working collectively, almost like one large farm supplying diverse markets while at the same time optimising each farms productivity.”

With sales of organic fruit and vegetables constituting 34pc of the total organic market

it seems like the perfect time to develop a project on this scale with the ultimate aim of increasing supply into the domestic market.



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