

# MAXIMISING ORGANIC PRODUCTION SYSTEMS

### THE PROBLEM: barriers to the development of Irish organic horticulture



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,  
Bia agus Mara  
Department of Agriculture,  
Food and the Marine



The European Agricultural Fund  
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Sales of organic fruit and vegetables have risen considerably in Ireland over the past few years. According to Bord Bia (Irish Food Board) retail sales of organic horticultural alone rose by €7.5m in 2016.

Much of the organic horticultural products are imported (>70%) and while this will be inevitable given the range of varieties on offer, Irish farmers are individually limited by a lack of capacity to meet consistent demand due to their small farm scale. Farm viability can be further compromised as the growers are inclined to produce the same crop, harvested at a similar time, causing unwanted surplus and wastage which undermines economic performance on each farm.

Even with significant growth and clear market demand for organic food, there are still barriers to the future growth and development of organic horticulture in Ireland. For the continuity of supply barrier, there is a tangible solution that with an innovative approach, may not only be addressed, but actually demonstratively solved. A solution that may be replicated by others, and it centres around the unique acceptance of organic producers to work together.

Some three years ago, a group of organic horticultural farmers asked the lead partner in this project (Gillian Westbrook from the Irish Organic Association) to find an answer to the following overarching issue: *sustainable continuity of supply*.

### Objectives of the project

The project aims to achieve a practical and replicable solution to the problem of



**Padraig Fahy, EIP Operational Group member, with tomato plants**

### by Gillian Westbrook

supply and demand of organic horticultural produce as well as making farms more sustainable through reducing dependency on nutrient imports. The primary goal of this project is to design a cropping system to enable 11 farms to work together to supply growing market demands. This will reduce dependence on imported organic horticultural products and shorten the supply chain in an Irish context.

The different members of the Operational Group will work together to outline a profile of each participating farm and identify markets that each farm business supplies to build a picture of current capacity on each farm.

Over the course of the project, the grower will adopt the cropping system designed

for them, and integrate their farm into the wider cropping plan, with the end objective of increasing overall market supply from the group of 11 producers.

Within the group, comprising of eleven farms, there are some growers who have an established retail supply, but for the times when their own farm is in deficit of a certain crop, they are forced to import, to keep their contract engagement, which is costly. For certain crops which perform well in Irish conditions, all of the group are growing that crop and often the same variety, harvesting it at the same time, which causes an oversupply in volume as the local market has insufficient demand, resulting in wastage. Surplus production is a huge issue with significant financial implications.

## From the supply chain perspective

Retailers and suppliers to retailers (packers & distributors) do not expect horticultural products to be available 52 weeks of the year; but they do require better continuity and optimised (extended) growing times for many crops. These comments have been echoed for many years and lack of accurate data on existing market demands, let alone future requirements, causes problems for the growers.

Uncertainty in what to grow, especially for the larger retail markets, tends to result in all the growers producing the same crop, causing each grower to directly, and unknowingly compete with one another, often having no alternative than to sell their product for below or at production costs.

The retail requirements can and are expected to vary considerably over the duration of the project. As such, the results of the project are not going to provide a silver bullet, but it is expected to deliver a tailor made cropping system that has the flexibility to react to market demand. But first, we need to establish exactly what is the market demand.

Other smaller markets will also be considered as the group of growers are extremely mixed in terms of capacity, production and location. Some of the growers will focus on developing their local supply and only supplying others in the group with surplus product, while others will concentrate on the larger markets.

**Further updates and information on the project will be available on our webpage and in future Organic Matters as well a full publicly available dissemination of project.**

**Des Thorpe explains field scale vegetable production on his farm  
Inset: Des and Olive Thorpe, Operational Group members  
credit Patrick Browne**



### Future Proofing Knowledge

Another major issue facing the growers is the shortage of qualified advisors experienced in organic systems. There is currently only one expert in Ireland in organic field scale production, and this expert (who will act as a consultant for the project) is nearing retirement. Innovation is needed to collate and consolidate the knowledge base by bringing together other experts that can work collectively to deliver advice in the future.

By working with a group of suitably qualified persons through this proposed three-year project, the growers, the advisors and the horticulture scientists will increase their own understanding of organic cropping systems which shall be recorded and disseminated to the wider community.

### THE OPPORTUNITIES: scale and geographical distribution

Unlike the conventional horticultural sector, the organic sector is made up of many small farms, widely distributed across Ireland. The scale and geographical location limits access to larger markets, but at the same time, offers a unique advantage if the growers work and produce for the market as if they were one farm.

The differing geographical locations offer opportunity with regards to proximity to various commercial centres for distribution purposes. Furthermore, the divergent characteristics of each farm, including soil and weather (climatic) conditions, offer a wider ranging choice of crops and varieties.

The geographical spread of this proposed group of organic growers will also provide for variations in harvesting times, enhanced further by differing seed choices, resulting in extended production periods.



**Field scale carrot production**