

**Iain Tolhurst - For planet-friendly food, choose an organic box scheme - 09/03/2007**

**Interviewer:** I'm here today at the walled garden with Iain Tolhurst of Tolhurst Organic Produce.

Hi Iain, can you explain to me what a box scheme is?

**Iain:** Yes, a box scheme is a weekly supply of local, in season, organic vegetables most of which will have come from a farm.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think box schemes are better for the environment?

**Iain:** Well, there are a whole of reasons. The main ones, I think, are predominantly the fact that we are educating the public about what local food is really about.

The fact that we don't have to have transport covering large distances is a real bonus as well.

The fact that we are operating on a local basis gives us a local community feel to what we do - I think the social element of food is very important.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like box schemes are easier for the grower: you can pack what you've got in season and cut out the middle man. But are they really easier and better for the customer? For example, do they end up getting swedes all winter?

**Iain:** Well, we try to avoid swedes every week during the winter as far as we can. In fact one of the few crops we don't grow is swedes because the climate here is generally too hot to do swede.

What we try to encourage with our customers is to be creative with their cooking. So, a few recipes obviously help and we do try to have as much range as possible; for most of the year we can manage at least 13-14 items in the large bag. So there is a good range. The fact that we have tunnels and greenhouses helps out during the winter.

The most difficult period is the hungry gap which, for us, is from the end of March through to the early part of June.

**Interviewer:** OK. Some people say that organic food is too expensive. But a price comparison by the organic box scheme business Riverford against Sainsbury's prices for the same non organic items showed that five out of seven of their boxes were actually cheaper. How do you think your veg boxes compare in price and quality to organic food in supermarkets?

**Iain:** Well, we have done a similar sort of check with supermarket produce and we've found much the same as they have at Riverford that in most cases we compare favourably with conventional produce and the fact that we are dealing direct to consumers means that we can offer organic products at a

fairly reasonable price

**Interviewer:** Right. How about the quality?

**Iain:** It depends how you measure quality. If you want perfectly straight carrots and cucumbers all the same size and shape then, no, we don't manage but what we do manage in terms of quality is very good quality in terms of cooking, quality in terms of taste and quality in terms of how we look after the environment.

**Interviewer:**How do you control pests naturally?

**Iain:** As far as possible we like to work with the systems approach idea which is really looking after the whole environment.

So we manage the environment, we manage the hedgerows, we manage the beetle banks, we manage a whole range of crops which we grow specifically - or rather, plants that we grow specifically to encourage predatory insects

*[A beetle bank is a raised bank, made by ploughing and planted with perennial plants, running across a crop field to provide good habitat for predators feeding on pests and so help improve natural biological pest control.]*

Beetle banks can also serve as habitat for birds and rodents. are

The fact that we have a lot of green manures in the rotation means that we've got quite long term cover on ground which encourages beetles and ground flora and fauna.

So, we are really about managing the whole system to reduce the problems of pest and disease and in most cases that's worked extremely well. We have very few pest problems at all.

**Interviewer:**A recent audit of Tolhurst Organic Produce by the University of Surrey found you create just eight tonnes of carbon a year, 45% of which is from electricity to produce and distribute organic veg to over 400 organic customers. This is the same annual carbon footprint, I believe, as that of an average household. This makes your business an amazing 90% more efficient than non-organic produce grown and delivered to the supermarket. Did this figure surprise you or were you expecting this kind of result?

**Iain:** I was surprised by the figure. I didn't really understand quite where our carbon footprint was within the business. I always had the feeling that we were reasonably favourable in that respect but the fact that it is similar to the average household, I think, was a surprise.

The really surprising thing was the amount of carbon which is attributed to what is a very, very small amount of electricity we use within the business. 45% of our carbon footprint is electricity which is a very difficult component to try and remove from the system completely.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a bit about your crop rotation process? For

example, how does your use of rotations mean you use less energy to produce your crops?

**Iain:** Yes, the rotations are very important. It is not just about reducing energy. It is also about controlling pest, diseases, making fertility available.

We have found that because we are predominantly using green manures for improving fertility we have, in most cases, very good soil structure. That means we can reduce our number of cultivations - the actual amount of tillage that goes into preparing the land we've been able to reduce by quite a large factor.

The fact that we are not having to continually run over land does mean that we're not incurring problems of compaction and things of that type.

So it is an indirect benefit really. The rotations we see as being pivotal to the whole systems approach to the way we grow our organic vegetables here.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel that the way that you grow your crops has helped you with the latest spell of bad weather?

**Iain:** It has been particularly bad for all growers, conventional or organic. There's a certain amount of resilience in what we do in that we can quite quickly change track. So, where we have had some crop failures this year due to flooding and poor weather, we are able to put more crops in to cover the gap. They may be a bit later but we've had to be a little bit creative about growing this year. It's been a much bigger challenge than usual. Our yields are definitely down. There's no question of that and that may well continue to impact on our supply for quite sometime yet.

**Interviewer:** What other policies and procedures do you have in place for reducing energy use at Tolhurst Organic Produce? I've heard you want to use cycle-powered rickshaws to distribute veg around Oxford.

**Iain:** Yes. We're looking at this. It doesn't actually make very much of a saving. Because we are already in a situation where we're using very minimal inputs, it's very difficult to save very much more without going to large capital expenditure.

We are thinking more about reducing the area in which we deliver to. We may well, in time, perhaps bring our customer base nearer to the farm.

**Interviewer:** I was going to ask if you had any plans to expand your business beyond Oxford and Reading but in fact you want to get more local.

**Iain:** Yes. That's right. We are not going to dump our existing customers in Oxford at the moment, obviously, because it wouldn't be very good for business! We are thinking in terms of certainly not increasing geographical area. We need to contain the area in which we deliver.

**Interviewer:** The Soil Association Organic Market Report in 2007 shows that retail sales of organic products through box and mail order schemes

increased by an estimated 53% in 2006. Have you experienced a rise in the number of interested customers over the last two years?

**Iain:** Yes. Certainly there has been a steady rise but we've always had a fairly steady rise in customer numbers really since we started. We are seeing rises at the moment of around probably 20% a year but the year before was higher. So it hasn't gone up hugely for us in the last 12 months.

We are working on the basis of around 450 during the winter. Unfortunately it drops during the summer. This is a problem I think most box schemes have to experience, particularly in areas of affluent customers where a lot of people tend to be away.

And also a lot of our customers are also growing their own now in allotments which is very good - we are very pleased to hear that people are growing their own - but it does mean that during the summer we have problems sometimes having enough customers, certainly during the summer holiday period. It actually drops about 40%, which is quite significant, over an eight week period.

It starts to pick up again from immediately the schools go back which is the first or second week of September. It rises very, very steadily right the way through the whole winter and the highest demand we generally find is between the period of January - the first two weeks of January we get a lot of enquiries (I think, people making New Year's Resolutions about food, health kicks!) and that continues to rise from early January - right through to about the end of April/early May. Which is difficult for us because it's the time of most difficult supply.

**Interviewer:** So does organic food and farming produce planet-friendly and people-friendly food?

**Iain:** Yes. I think there are major benefits to organic food and farming. Some of those benefits are perhaps quite difficult to quantify - the social benefits are ones I think that people have tended to ignore. There is a huge social benefit in organic food if it's done in the right way.

But certainly in terms of reduced energy usage, more care for the environment, increased biodiversity (I think this is very important. We've seen huge increases of biodiversity here in the time we've been on this land.), I think all those factors help to reinforce the fact that organic food and farming is definitely better for the planet.

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