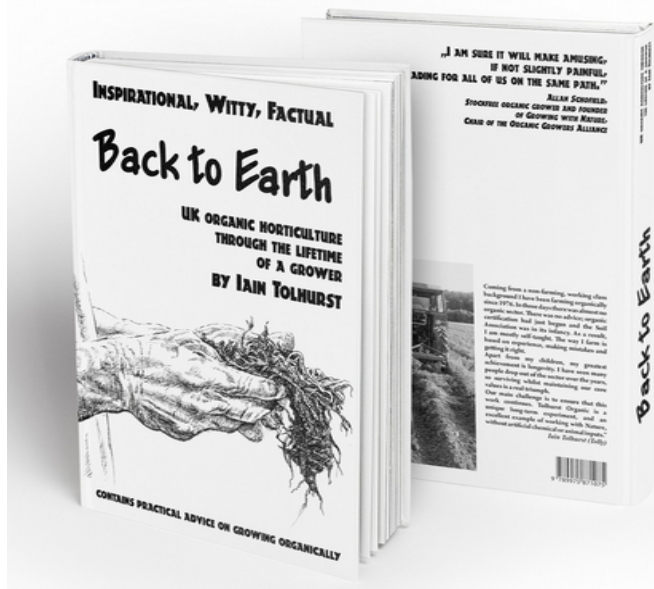


Back to Earth

UK organic horticulture through the lifetime of a grower

by Iain Tolhurst

reviewed by John Curtis



Celebrating 40 years of Tolhurst Organic, this book brings together Iain's articles from various sources (including the Tolhurst Organic newsletter *The Onion Oracle*) from 1980 to 2016. The illustrations are lovely, and there is a list of people who sponsored them.

Iain had previously worked on a large conventional dairy farm, which made him decide to go vegetarian and to pursue organic horticulture instead, starting in 1976. It's not always been an easy ride for Iain – desperation and near financial ruin occasionally feature.

The first article is 'Strawberry Success' from November 1981. Iain had just moved to Moor View Farm, a 5.5 acre plot of land in Cornwall, 800 feet above sea level and exposed to winds, with 70 inches of rain per annum and very acidic soil. Early articles are strawberry-based, the farm being mostly devoted to organic strawberry growing, although other veg crops were grown too, eg carrots, potatoes and brassicas, to provide a crop rotation.

The move to stockfree

In a 1987 article, 'stockless' is mentioned for the first time, when Iain describes his five-day tour of stockless farms in Germany. Stockless means a farm with no livestock although, unlike stockfree, it doesn't preclude the use of animal manures and animal by-products sourced from outside the farm.

Tolhurst Organic's gradual switch to stockfree is fully explained in the August 1999 edition of *The Onion Oracle*: "We do not use any manure from conventional farms or

organic farms. We operate a livestock-free system relying on green manures for fertility building ... We have recently discovered that the potting compost (approved by the Organic Standards bodies), which we use to raise some of our plants in, contains some slaughterhouse waste for nutrients. This waste would probably come from animals that would have been fed some GMO ration; all conventionally reared animals are fed a mixture of cereals, some being soya and maize, which is now all mixed with GMO soya and maize. We shall have to cease using this compost as will every other compost user (all the growers in the UK are affected by this). At present there are no potting composts available that are organically approved and free of animal products. This is a big problem to all growers. We shall be experimenting with alternative materials which will be costly and time consuming. It will certainly mean that our production of some crops will be difficult and possibly impossible until we can develop suitable compost. We do use around six tons of horse manure that we compost."

In 2003 Iain's article 'Organic and Vegetarian?' appeared in *The Organic Grower* magazine, and was reproduced in *Growing Green International* in 2004. The pace accelerates, with *The Onion Oracle* of June 2005 discussing VON's stockfree standards. In 2006, there's a 'Going Stockfree' article in the Soil Association's *Organic Farming* magazine. Then in 2008, the Centre for Alternative Technology's *Clean Slate* magazine has an article 'Box Schemes and Beetle Banks', where Iain mentions stockfree and "stolen acres", the latter referring to some organic growers who effectively steal fertility by using non-organic manures from farms that often buy in cereals to feed their livestock.

An abundance of fairly bad weather

The weather, mostly bad weather, often features, and Iain describes himself as "the ultimate weather bore", which is very understandable given the number of different crops grown, most of them outdoors. Tolhurst Organic started their business in 1976, which was the year of the great drought in the UK, where Iain tells us that there was no rain from 25th April to 15th September. 1987 is a prominent year too, where a hurricane hit the south of England and destroyed some of their crops and a brand new polytunnel. 2007 was a bad year with a very wet summer, the worst year so far, but 2012 capped this when both spring and summer were very wet and cloudy, causing a large loss in yields, great difficulty harvesting crops, and for the first time slugs became a problem. Iain makes the point that he prefers droughts to flooding – you can easily add water if it doesn't rain, but you can't take it off if it floods.

The book starts with strawberry growing, but this was stopped abruptly in the 1990s when they had serious problems with verticillium wilt, a fungal disease. Things turn full circle in 2014 when Iain decides to re-introduce strawberry growing, helped by a recently developed green manure – Caliente Mustard.

Iain makes it clear throughout that rotation and green manures are the key to fertility management. There's a thorough discussion of this in 'Planning your rotation to enhance quality' in a Soil Association horticulture

symposium in 2005.

Organic horticulture farmers will find the book of great interest, and gardeners too I think. For instance, there's detailed advice on asparagus growing, netting against birds and insects, growing squash, growing strawberries, growing runner beans, and making your own compost for potting on seedlings. There are detailed articles on what earthworms actually do for your soil, implementing beetle banks, and coping with wireworm and leatherjackets. The level of detail, and Iain's practical experience with these, is something you would struggle to find elsewhere.

A few of the articles are taken from VON's *Growing Green International* magazine, but the vast majority are from other sources which aren't available for free, so by buying this book VON members will have access to information not already available to them.

Growing fruit and veg often involves getting things wrong to begin with until you've refined your ideas. The same is true for the naming of Tolhurst Organic's newsletter from which a large amount of the book material is taken from. The first newsletter that appears in the book is called *The first newsletter published by Tolhurst Organic*, the second *The Broccoli Bugle*, then it's *The Parsnip Post* before they finally settle on *The Onion Oracle* from 1996 until the present. After a few false starts, I think they ended up with the right name choice. ♦

Back to Earth is a compilation of Iain Tolhurst's articles written for various magazines, websites and media. In essence, the book reflects the processes and developments of organic horticulture in the UK during the last four decades (1980-2016). This is the time when conventional agriculture in the UK turned, gradually, to organic farming (hence "back to earth") and, more recently, when stockfree organic farming secured its place among innovative resilient farming methods.

The aim of the book is to share with professional growers and agricultural students, as well as the wide public, the wonderful but hard experiences of a full-time grower, a member of the organic farming movement, and an inspiring teacher.

The contents portray developments in the marketplace, organic growing techniques, regulations and standards, all intertwined with political circumstances and international market trends – plus a wealth of practical advice for growers.

The book ends with a story, in which Iain Tolhurst reflects on his lifetime experiences, lessons learned, and gives his thoughts for the future.

David Graham, Chair of the Vegan Organic Network which part-funded the book, confirms *Back to Earth* is "an account that celebrates successes and learns from less successful experiments in sustaining life in the soil, without which there would be no life on earth".

For Iain Tolhurst himself, the book is a profound account of personal achievements, not without a fair share of struggle (desperate at times), but overall positive.

In hardcover, the book is beautifully illustrated by Irish artist Isobel Baldwin, using images from the farm.

To order your copy for £24.99 plus postage, visit the Tolhurst website:

www.tolhurstorganic.co.uk/back-to-earth