

GOING ORGANIC

By investing in soils, Arahura Farms has created an organic oasis in northwest Victoria.

By Nathan Dyer



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On a clear March afternoon, Sean Croft steps from his ute and walks across a paddock of bright green lettuces. Bending down, he plucks two plants from the irrigated red dirt, cuts the outer leaves from each and presents a pair of impeccable organic baby cos lettuces.

“No one thought we could produce lettuce in the heat of summer here, but we do,” says Sean, explaining how a decade of intensive composting has transformed the sandy Mallee soils here at Arahura Farms.

Located at Nyah West, about 30 km north west of Swan Hill, Victoria, Arahura Farms is one of Australia’s largest producers of organic carrots and beetroot, and is the only organic farm in the country that can produce carrots year-round.

Established by Sean’s parents, Tony and Jennie Croft, in 2000, the family’s original plan was to convert an existing dried fruit operation into an organic lavender farm. It turned out lavender demand wasn’t high, so when an agent suggested carrots the Crofts’ journey to organic vegetable farmers began.

Since then, Arahura Farms has expanded from 24 to 200 hectares, with weekly production of between 50 and 60 tonnes of carrots, 10-15 tonnes of beetroots, 15,000-17,000 heads of baby cos lettuces, and up to 20,000 heads of broccoli in winter. In addition to supplying wholesale fruit and vegetable markets across the country.

1 Sean Croft holds organic carrots produced on Arahura Farms’ Nyah West property.

2 Workers wash organic lettuce in the packing shed.

» Compost is a bit of an art form and if you don’t get it right the consequences can be massive. «

Sean Croft

Sean says a relationship with Coles supermarkets has been critical to the company’s success. “Coles have been good to us in understanding the difference between organics and conventional, and in helping us get to where we both want to be,” he says.

On top of conventional supplier contracts, the farm has had some unusual requests, none more so than a recent supply contract, now finished, with the Crown Prince of Dubai for organic beetroot for the Prince’s juice factory. “Beetroot juice helps the blood carry more oxygen,” says Sean. “He wanted to make juice for his racehorses.”



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Arahura's biggest success factor has been soil management. Sean, a diesel mechanic by trade who returned to the farm in 2009, says until recently the company was using up to 60 tonnes of organic compost each week. He admits it is expensive but says the resulting increase in production has been worth the cost.

"Through using so much compost we've been able to run, at times, an eight-month carrot rotation when it's supposed to be three years, and still pull good yields," he explains. "We acknowledge that we're probably pushing the envelope a bit here, so we understand we need to make that investment."

TRICKY BUSINESS

Despite the obvious benefits, Sean says composting is a complex process and comes with some risks. "Compost is a bit of an art form and if you don't get it right the consequences can be massive," he says, "Your whole crop comes down to how your suppliers have managed that pile of compost."

Although they've had some failures, Sean says overall the

- 3 Lettuce ready for packaging.
- 4 Up to 15 tonnes of beetroot are produced each week.
- 5 A handful of organic carrots are checked for growth progress.
- 6 Arahura Farms' trucks travel to Melbourne every second night.
- 7 A bag of freshly packed organic carrots
- 8 Workers hand weed a carrot paddock at Arahura Farms.

farm's intensive composting has produced remarkable results. "At one stage we'd grown the farm 1,000 percent on the same water usage, and that was just through increasing the water retention of the soil by putting such large quantities of compost out," he says "So for every carrot we pull out the water used is a lot less."

To avoid an over reliance on compost the Crofts are looking at new ways to improve soil, including fish and seaweed supplements. "The key things we're looking for are micro nutrients and carbon, to increase the water holding capacity, to improve the soil structure and improve beneficial

microbes," says Sean. "Basically, we're taking Mallee sand and making something of it."

Not far from the lettuce paddock, Sean stops at a field of carrots. Dotted along the rows of green plants, workers in yellow high-vis vests are busy hand weeding. Although the costs are high Sean says the organic benefits are worth it. "Because it's what isn't in organics that makes the difference," he says.

In addition to hand weeding and composting, the Crofts use green-manure crops and cover crops including sorghum and mustard as bio-fumigants to kill unwanted soil pathogens and improve soil condition.

QUALITY VERSUS QUANTITY

Although the farm has recently doubled in size from 100 to 200 hectares, Sean says Australia's organic vegetable market remains relatively small. "Generally, I don't think the organic market can take much more than is currently being supplied," he says, explaining that the recent expansion has more to do with quality than quantity.

"It's about getting a better crop rotation and meeting our customers' needs more consistently," says Sean. "By having more land we can produce more consistent quality and get more consistent pack-outs by widening our rotations a little." The additional land will allow for the introduction of more lettuce varieties, and another line of spring onions and broccoli.

As well as supplying domestic clients, the company exports small volumes to Singapore and Hong Kong. But Sean says

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inconsistency in organic certification regimes between Australia and key competitors makes it hard for Arahura to compete on price.

"The cost of production here is massive compared to other countries," he says. "Those workers weeding on their hands and knees, for example, they're earning above the award rate, whereas if you go elsewhere in the world, say South America, there's no way they would be paying that, and their organic standards are far more lenient, so they can use products that we can't use here," he adds. "The most frustrating thing is it's all called organic at the end of the day."

Back at the farm's packing shed workers are in full flight packing lettuces and carrots. "Ten years ago this shed didn't exist, it was mostly grape vines still," says Sean, explaining how the Crofts have built everything from the ground up.

Today, the farm employs around 60 full-time and casual staff, and its two refrigerated Mack trucks make the journey to Melbourne every second night. "And that's all been achieved through good management and looking after the dirt that we've got," says Sean, leaning against a pallet of freshly packed organic lettuce boxes. ■



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