

A bible for organic farming

Organic Farming,

by

Nic Lampkin,

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by Roger Samson

In 1988, I remember reading a critical book review that Nic Lampkin wrote on one of the many superficial or lightweight" books on organic farming. I was left with the impression that the world would have to wait until his own book was out to have the definitive text on organic farming. Well, his book is now out and the pressure is off. He has delivered a definitive text.

This book is anything but superficial and it may become the most influential agricultural text of the 90's. There are several reasons this book is excellent but the main reason is that Lampkin for the first time integrates the European scientific literature (German in particular) into a readable text for a wide audience. I think a considerable amount of credit for the book should go not only to the author and the long list of contributors but also to European researchers for providing much of the content. While North American's have been busy researching conservation tillage, pesticides, and growth hormones, others have obviously been busy working elsewhere.

Lampkin, who is the development director of the Aberystwyth Centre for Organic Husbandry and Agroecology in Wales, is an agricultural economist by training but appears to be a generalist at heart. The book covers all areas of organic farming including substantial chapters on weed control, livestock husbandry, and the physical and financial effects of converting to organic farming.

Few other texts have attempted to tackle these subjects to the same significant extent. The main thrust of the book concentrates on the principals and practices of organic farming, yet one of the best chapters in the book is entitled "The Wider Issues". Appetizing discussion and references are given on the quality of organic food and the environmental impacts of organic farming versus conventional farming.

Some of the farm case studies are excellent examples of where the greatest potential for organic farming exists today - the diversified, mixed livestock farms with value added processing and marketing. One farm featured is the Brynilys Farm which has a 70 cow Guernsey herd, with subsidiary sheep and beef components. I had an opportunity to visit this farm on the Welsh coast in 1985 and it must be considered one of Europe's best. The Brynilys farm, run by Gareth and Rachel Rowlands, is also included in the chapter on marketing and processing. The farm provides milk to a regional organic cheese cooperative as well as having its own dairy which markets milk, yoghurt, cottage cheese, cream and butter. The entire family is involved in the enterprise which also provides self-guided farm tours and a farm shop/tea room for its customers.

In general, only minor criticisms of the book can be found. There is little discussion on fruit production and agro-forestry. As well, cover crops and green manures are dealt with only briefly but, in fairness, these are not widely used in Britain. Some other small problems with the book are that the photos, particularly of mechanical weeding devices, are too small. While I am not that familiar with rotation design for English farms, some examples of suitable organic rotations appear weak. The rotations could be categorized by the type of enterprise they represent, with better descriptions of how weed control and fertility is maintained in the rotation.

Overall, the book will contribute much to dispelling present myths and settling controversy regarding organic farming. It will also create new material for those who oppose it. For example, the financial projections for converting farms, particularly non-livestock ones, are not very encouraging when price premiums are not available. But then again, this is within the context of the over-subsidized European markets.

Organic Farming is a book that is not only timely but long over due. Without question this book is recommended reading for all those seriously interested in the subject. It is a comprehensive information source that will help not only organic farmers but also the credibility of organic farming.

Organic Farming is available from Diamond Farm Book Publishers, Flat 3, Brighton, ONTARIO
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