

TIPS FOR ORGANIC GROWERS

This fact sheet outlines some important tips for organic growers so they can get the most out of their management and production systems.

Prior to organic transition

Before you begin the journey to organic production, there are a few factors you should have researched and clarified first. Some of these questions should include:

Have you had an Organic Soil Audit performed?

Organic certifying bodies have strict regulations on the presence of pesticides and heavy metal residuals in soil. SWEP have a comprehensive Organic Soil Audit test package which will provide you with what you need to know before you commence certification. This will also give you a chance to realistically evaluate whether any preparation or improvement needs to be undertaken prior to being locked into using only organic certified methods and/or products.

What do your neighbours do?

It's nigh impossible to separate practices with fencelines, no matter how good people's intentions are. So if your neighbours are fairly casual with their non-certified management then it could cause some serious issues down the track for you. It's a good idea to discuss your plans with your neighbours before you begin, particularly as it may open up opportunities (perhaps they want to jump on board as well) or reveal potentially frustrating situations (e.g. if they were planning on selling up sometime soon you'd have to go over this process again with the new tenants).

What soil preparation do I need to consider?

If you began to pay off a mortgage at the highest end of your budget, with little means to absorb any price increases, rate rises would ruin you eventually. Likewise, if the soil analysis shows a severe deficiency in potassium and nitrogen, and you want to grow potatoes, you're probably going to have to use chemical fertilisers initially to build up your soil before introducing a specific, nutrient and site suitable cultivar. Sure, there are plenty of organic fertilisers available that could achieve these nutrient levels, but application in such enormous amounts would be impractical.

Many people don't realise that successful organic producers didn't stop using chemical fertilisers overnight. They introduced different practices gradually over time, and worked with what they had in terms of soil suitability and land use. So in the case where you had planned to grow organic potatoes, you might conclude that this option will be too expensive and unreasonable to achieve and maintain organically in the long term. It may be better to concentrate on preparing the soil to produce (for example) organic barley or wheat instead.

Organic management practices

For those of you already practicing organic production, there are a few factors to be aware of to ensure your success.

- When calculating fertiliser requirements, you **must reduce the nutrients recommended in the test results by 30%** for manure, compost and other organic fertilisers.
- Manure and compost type fertilisers need to be **cultivated into the soil** during application, not just spread on the surface.
- All of the recommendations that are provided in a SWEP soil test are necessary for that soil to achieve optimum balance. They are not provided as an estimate, or an option, or for non-organic growers only.
- Weed infestations can be drastically improved by balancing the soil – particularly by correcting the soil structure. Correctly balancing exchangeable cations increases soil friability, hence also the space for soil air and water and improved root movement and nutrient exchange for desirable plants. However, adopting non chemical or organic practices will not **remove** weeds for you. Weeds can only be removed by physical or chemical intervention – i.e. you!
- Increasing soil biology is **not** necessarily good for the soil - instead, it is important to balance the total active biological populations. Similarly, regardless of whether it's certified organic or claims to stimulate this or that etc - using **any** product is not necessarily good for the soil without knowing the needs of the soil first.

Ongoing monitoring

SWEP provides a range of services relating to organic production, including:

- Soil tests for pre-certification, transition and monitoring, as well as
- Compost/fertiliser quality and monitoring analysis for organic consumers and industry suppliers

SWEP recommend you obtain advice from a reputable organisation for your organic production, particularly before and during certification transition. There are also many local, regional and industry bodies who can assist with specific production areas who can be contacted through the following links:

Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (Organic farming): http://www.rirdc.gov.au/RIRDC/programs/established-rural-industries/organics/organic-systems_home.cfm

Biological Farmers of Australia: <http://www.bfa.com.au>

Organic Federation of Australia: <http://www.ofa.org.au>

National Association of Sustainable Agriculture Australia: <http://www.nasaa.com.au>

Australian Certified Organic: <http://www.australianorganic.com.au>

For further information please visit our website: www.swep.com.au or call us on 03 9701 6007.