

## Pertwood Organics Co-operative - Case study

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### Background

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Pertwood Organics Co-operative is based on and works closely with one of the largest organic farms in the UK. Lower Pertwood Farm lies midway between Bath and Salisbury in the south western corner of the Wiltshire Downs. The farm covers around 1,850 acres and began converting to organic production systems field by field in 1986. Full conversion was completed in 1996 when the last few fields were certified by the Soil Association - it is now one of the largest organic units in the UK.

Organic food production is based on a system of farming that maintains and replenishes the fertility of the soil. This is done without the use of pesticides, chemical fertilisers, herbicides or other artificial treatments. There is no genetic modification, or radiation or other 'un-natural' and unknown treatments. Organic certification means the food has been grown to strict standards that are verified by the United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS).

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### Key Drivers

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The main driver behind conversion of Lower Pertwood Farm to an organic farm and setting up of the Pertwood Organics Co-operative was to:

*promote organic produce and deliver it to the customer with the least amount of damage to the planet.*

From the outset, the intention was to run an economically viable farm through food production systems that work with natural ecosystems and that form direct links with local markets. However, as one of employees stated, it is more than just food production, it embraces much wider issues:

"To me organic is not just about food being free from genetic modification, pesticides and chemicals, it encompasses the physical, environmental, moral, ethical and social beliefs that I have. It's about natural food being grown in a complementary way with the natural environment. Real food produced naturally and distributed throughout the local area through box schemes, markets, farmers markets, farm shops and the ever-vanishing local greengrocers. Working with the environment and social structure in a way that is beneficial to all parties. It's become almost a trend, a brand name. The emphasis no longer seems to be on good natural and fresh food but on mass produced, pre-packaged products given an organic status that somehow makes them good for you. The availability of organic foods throughout supermarkets has led to the birth of organic Cornish pasties and pot noodles, turning the idea of natural organic food into a mass-produced money-spinner."

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## **Approach**

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### ***Farm Management***

The farm ranges from the Deverill Valley, where the deeper alluvial soils support a vegetable field rotation system, to the chalky downland which employs an arable rotation growing wheat, oats, rye, barley, triticale, peas and beans. Grazing by sheep and cattle provides fertility for the vegetable and arable rotations, and maintains the ancient downs. The sheep are rare Wiltshire Horns, which naturally moult their wool for nesting birds, while Lleys, a prolific sheep breed from North Wales, produce fine weaving or knitting wools. Both provide lamb for eating and breeding stock for other organic farms. The cattle are rare breeds including Pole Herefords, Welsh Blacks, Beef and Dairy Shorthorns, which raise their own calves on a single suckler system.

Wildlife conservation is integral to organised farming, and in recent years the farm has planted over 25,000 trees and created downland pastures rich in wild grasses and flowers. In some places, the bio-diversity incorporates 25 plant species per m<sup>2</sup>.

### ***Encouraging Biodiversity***

The farm includes large swathes of downland managed under a stewardship scheme. These areas of permanent pasture contain over 3000 varieties of wild flora including orchids, cowslips, and harebells. Cardinal beetles and rare Holly Blue butterflies have been spotted in the fields. Anthills in the pasture prove that these areas have never been ploughed.

### ***Local Markets***

Arable crops are supplied to organic food companies to produce bread, beer, biscuits, porridge and a range of animal foods. Local supermarkets buy a high proportion of the farm produce, including nearly all of the organic meat.

The co-operative distributes organic vegetable boxes and pick and choose organic food orders, sourced from local producers or approved importers (mainly fruit). The Box Scheme, supplies organically grown produce to households with a minimum of packaging and transport costs. The aim is to bring food from the farmer direct to the family as fresh as possible with a minimum of intermediaries. Boxes are delivered to a neighbourhood 'drop off' point once a week where customers can then collect their box. Advantages of the box scheme include:

- supporting and encouraging local organic farmers and growers;
- customers obtain fresh organic food at a reasonable price;
- packaging and transport is kept to a minimum;
- local communities are helped to develop;
- the producers obtain a fair price for their produce.
- Social and Community Links

Pertwood Organics Co-operative is a workers' co-operative and is owned by its members. It was started by people living on the farm who wanted to find something to do that was

ethical and worthwhile. Anyone who works for the company for more than six months is entitled to become a co-operative member. Any quarterly profits would be distributed according to the number of hours worked, but the members choose to reinvest in the co-operative.

The co-operative maintains links with the community through public events such as Farm Walks, the Green Gathering and the Wiltshire Show. Over the summer months open days are sometimes held to show the public how the land is managed and to allow a greater understanding of the farming practices. It attends and helps revive traditional local markets (not farmers' markets because there is too much red tape).

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## **Business Benefits**

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Pertwood's links with the community has served to strengthen its economic position through becoming a known, trusted and preferred supplier to local communities, health food shops, supermarkets and organic food companies. In particular, certification by the Soil Association has boosted customer confidence in the farms' produce. The co-operative's local links have also acted to strengthen the local economy, which in turn is providing a more secure and economically stable future for Pertwood Organics Co-operative to operate in.

There is a growing demand for organic food. Organic production methods rely on a modern and scientific understanding of ecology and soil science, but also depend on traditional methods of crop rotations to ensure fertility is maintained and weeds and pests controlled. Consequently it can provide cheaper production through reduced dependence on non-renewable resources and supplies. At the same time the variety of crops and livestock reduces the economic dependence of farms on one crop or sector of the market.

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## **Environmental and other benefits**

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### **QUALITY**

Local distribution means that the consumer is close to the production and can have more say in the quality of the product. If a lettuce looks good, but tastes bitter we can get straight back to the grower and advise them to make a change.

### **VARIETY**

Local markets encourage farmers to diversify into other types of crops which provides better choice for customers.

### **WASTAGE**

A huge problem facing farmers who sell to supermarkets is the specifications they demand. Crops are rejected if they do not conform resulting in waste and economic difficulties for the farmer. We can talk to our customers directly and explain that various markings and shapes are part of a natural product.

For more information about Pertwood Organics Co-operative see the website at:  
<http://www.pertwood-organics.co.uk>

