



organic farming technical summary

Organic Soft Fruit Production: Primary Considerations

OFTS No 41

Which Market?

Supermarkets

- Probably supplied through intermediate 'category manager'.
- Large volume of fruit required.
- Requires investment in sophisticated cooling and other facilities.
- Protected growing almost essential.
- Strict requirements on quality control, grading, record keeping and traceability.

Local Sales

- Perishable products mean retailers need re-supply frequently.
- EC quality standards apply.
- Cooling and packing facilities required.

Farmgate Sales

- Picking fruit shortly before sale minimises wastage and ensures freshness.
- Allows sale of other produce at the same time.
- Grower keeps all of customers money.

Pick-Your-Own

- Becoming much less popular with buyers of conventional food.
- Supervision can be time-consuming.
- No harvesting costs and minimal packaging costs.

Which Crops?

- For general sales strawberries are the 'must have' fruit.
- Raspberries are also popular, but control of raspberry beetle may cause difficulty.
- Other fruits are less popular but gooseberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants, white currants, blackberries and tayberries may utilise awkward areas of land and give useful, although smaller, returns.

Is My Site Suitable?

- Fruit crops are relatively valuable and merit favourable sites with fertile soils of good depth and texture. Poorly drained and heavy clay soils are unsuitable.
- Avoid frost pockets. Frosts damage the flowers of most soft fruits with loss of yield.
- Avoid exposed sites.
- Perennial weeds are difficult to control in perennial crops – avoid sites with perennial weed infestation.

- Check soil acidity and lime if necessary. This is particularly important for long-lived bush and cane crops. Check phosphorus and potassium levels.
- Raspberries require a free draining site.
- Sites with a known history of strawberry red core or raspberry root rot are unsuitable for these crops. Verticillium wilt can be a problem on strawberries following potatoes.
- Soils can be checked for damaging levels of root feeding and virus-vector nematodes.

Which Growing System?

Conventional growers employ a wide range of production systems from traditionally grown in open fields, field grown with temporary cover through to module growing in permanent tunnels or glasshouses.

- Organic fruit crops cannot be grown in any medium other than field soil.
- Crops may be permanently, temporarily or never covered.
- Permanent cover is unlikely to be economic except for out of season production.
- Temporary covers (Spanish tunnels) allow picking in any weather and are demanded by supermarkets to ensure continuity of supply.
- Spanish tunnel crops are less affected by some diseases (such as Botrytis) and the controlled environment favours use of biological controls for pests. However, some pests and diseases (such as powdery mildew) may become more prevalent.
- There is little experience on which organic systems can be recommended. Spanish tunnels may be favoured because of the relatively high value of organic fruit, higher yields per unit area and improved control of some pests and diseases. The high cost of some inputs, such as organic plants and biological control agents, will also favour intensive, potentially high yielding systems.

Other Considerations?

- Who will pick the fruit? Fruit growers in general are increasingly dependent on Eastern European students – who now require accommodation of good standard and other amenities.
- Irrigation is needed where crops are covered. Consider available sources of water. Trickle systems are strongly preferred: overhead watering favours many diseases.
- Strict hygiene standards in fields (including portable toilets) and packing sheds are essential for crops to be eaten raw.

Action Points

- Soft fruit crops are expensive to establish and usually require investment in cooling and other facilities.
- An assured market for the fruit is essential before planting.
- Organic production systems for Scotland require development. Some pernicious problems such as raspberry beetle lack good organic controls and may seriously reduce yields. The price obtained for fruit must reflect these considerable risks.
- Considerable attention to detail is needed: successful organic fruit production requires an appetite for risk and innovation. It is not to be undertaken lightly!

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