

Towards a system approach in organic fruit growing

Opening address 13th International Conference on Cultivation Technique and Phytopathological Problems in Organic Fruit-Growing, Weinsberg 2008 - Pieter Jans Jansonius

Since the 1930's people have been working on alternatives for conventional agriculture. First aimed at avoiding the use of mineral fertilizers and later on with more emphasis on avoiding chemical sprays, saving the environment in general, improving human health and acquiring better tasting products.

When for example we look at apple growing over the last say 25 years a lot of things have changed. The pioneers of that period really had a hard time controlling scab and rosy apple aphid and many of them can tell you stories about picking bugs by hand from the trees. Production was often low and outer quality was not as important as it is today.

Weed control and manure spreading were carried out by hand or using all kind of home-made machinery. The market was very small and the trade structures often changing. Many of the pioneers lost large amounts of money due to bankruptcies of the trading organizations. The people in the sector were full of ideals and ideas that kept them going, up against the stream.

Research in this period was carried out by people who shared these ideals and wanted to support the organic growers. These people were organized in small institutions or hired directly by the growers to support them. Weinsberg was one of the first government financed institutes that started research on organic fruit growing.

Since then the organic fruit sector has flourished and grown. I will not discuss how this all came to be but I just want to mention a few accomplishments.

The growers have better equipment, more effective materials for crop protection and more knowledge on managing pests and diseases. Organic agriculture has become popular in society at large resulting in a growing market, more appreciation for the farmer and more public funding for research and other projects.

The quantity and outer quality of the apples produced has increased markedly.

The growers have better chances of earning a decent income today and converting to organic growing has become interesting from an economic perspective.

With more interest from policy makers and the increased funding for research on organic topics many of the mainstream institutes have become interested and started organic branches within their research programs. Bringing with them highly specialized knowledge and equipment. Over the years the volume of research somehow linked with organic agriculture has risen sharply.

The above mentioned changes were really needed to turn organic farming into a viable alternative for many growers and to produce more organic products. Most of us can count our blessings but many also have questions to the developments thus far.

- Have we gone too far on the way of simply substituting conventional methods and materials with organic alternatives?
- Have we developed a true alternative to conventional agriculture or just a very smart, more environment friendly substitute?
- Are we not trying too hard to reach conventional outer product standards, thereby forgetting our aim to produce healthier food, to use our resources in a responsible way, to protect and improve our orchards as a precious ecosystem.

Although our growing techniques and materials available have improved considerably there are still many problems unsolved and organic fruit growing is still a risky business. One crucial product taken from the list can put the whole system into danger. We are still very dependant on spraying products, some of which clearly have negative by-effects.

As a result of the growing awareness on this topic the planting of new scab-resistant varieties has increased. Using less fungicide also has its influence on the insect populations in the orchards which poses both threats and opportunities. We are starting to look more into the system as a whole.

With the relatively well functioning systems of organic fruit growing that have been developed we now have space to take a new step. Now is the time to further develop the system as a whole. This step is crucial if we want to develop organic agriculture into the true alternative we believe it can be.

Putting more emphasis on the system level also asks for a new approach in this conference. Over the years the 'Weinsberg gatherings' have been the place where all results with new materials and techniques were presented. No one involved in organic fruit growing in Europe can afford to miss this opportunity. The number of presentations over the last 10 years has always been 'almost too much' and the organizers had a tough job to guide us through the program in time. This shows the large amount of effort put into the research and is something to be proud of.

This year for the first time this conference was prepared by a group of participants from different countries. This shows the engagement but also gives new opportunities for further strengthening the exchange which is taking place here. We each have our own network and expertise. We think this conference can be even better than it has been so far by having more organized discussion of the material presented at this conference. In particular we want to put more emphasis on the system level. We aim to put the individual results into the broader perspective. At this conference we will try to make a first step in this direction by grouping the presentations by theme and taking time to compare results and discuss the links with other themes. In itself this discussion is not new but it always had to take place in the breaks of the program with too little time. By having this discussion in the plenary session we hope to stimulate the systems approach and help determining our common agenda.