

The Economics of Organic Growing by Hand

Charles Dowding



Views of gardens at Lower Farm in Somerset in October. Photo: Robert Carter

Steve, an American in our bed and breakfast came out one morning to help me pick some leaves. He wants to be a grower, but was at that time living in London with his partner who is an executive for Sotheby's. They had visited one of the top growers on the States' east coast to assess the economics of growing and Steve said that his partner just could not believe that this well known grower was working so hard and so productively for an income of around £14,000. (Actually that sounds reasonable for growing!)

To most of us that disparity sounds pretty familiar and shows how far apart the two

systems of economics are – agriculture on the one hand and resource extraction on the other. Most of the affluent nations' current high incomes are based on cheap oil which has been calculated to represent billions of slaves working for almost nothing.

But growing organic food has natural limits of production that mean we can never produce tons of it without a corresponding increase in effort. We have no cheap slaves, just our own muscles, time and occasional mechanical input.

Personally I have always eschewed most machines as well as chemical inputs and

offer here some figures of my inputs and outputs, to establish some idea of possible livelihood from small areas of land, using hand labour only. However, do remember that these numbers are peculiar to me and my situation, as follows.

Expenses

Most of my purchased labour is for harvesting and most of the harvesting is of salad leaves, twice weekly from March to October and once weekly in winter, if not too cold. I pay £8 hourly, aiming to hang on to whoever I have trained up, just one person for the most part. Doing a good job of picking leaves is skilled work, as are many of the undervalued tasks of a grower.

Other expenses come in dribs and drabs and always add up to a higher total than one imagines. Some of the larger items include repairs to a barn roof (materials only), a pallet each year of West Riding multipurpose compost, green waste and mushroom compost, seeds - which could be reduced(!), accountant's fees, servicing my lawnmower (yes I do need one petrol engine), part costs of running the car for deliveries and other jobs (about 1600 miles per annum) and polythene bags for salad leaves.

Becoming proficient at salad has clearly helped profitability. More than three quarters of total income is now from bags of washed, mixed salad leaves, sold for £11-12/kg in weights of 125g, 250g and 500g, the latter for pubs and restaurants. My two small polytunnels of 60 square metres are vital to maintain sales through winter, but most output is from outdoor leaves, between May and October. Even in December, over half of my leaves are outdoor grown – radicchios, endives, leaf radish and mustards – and in 2008 we were harvesting some of them in a frozen state on

December 17th. I was surprised at how well they thawed out overnight in the crates.



Top garden in September. Photo: Charles Dowding

Expenses	2007	2008
Wages	6130	5660
Building, tools	832	850
Compost	714	636
Petrol	160	220
Car capital	644	644
Office	620	390
Seeds, plants	550	540
Car service	190	270
Telephone	180	190
Electricity	170	250
Clothing	170	260
Water	150	150
Website	60	90
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>10770</u>	<u>10150</u>
Sales		
Boxes	4100	4300
Salad	13700	19300
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>17800</u>	<u>23600</u>
INCOME	7030	13450

I have enjoyed three good years for salad, with mild winters, warm springs / autumns and damp summers. In 2009 I was

encouraged that, after the relatively severe frosts of early January and February, there were plenty of leaves by late February, about £200 worth on February 25th from one week's growth, all out of the tunnels and with plants picked in such a way that the same harvest is possible the following week, as long as it is not too cold.



Bottom garden in June. Photo: Charles Dowding

Vegetables, like the salad, are grown on undug beds and offer me the chance to effect some rotation of plant families with my predominant salad ones. The area down to vegetables is about 2/3 acre, compared to over an acre for salad. Double cropping of about half my beds increases the complexities of rotation.

The vegetables' much lower income demonstrates that, were it not for the premium price of mixed salad leaves, I would be out of business by a mile. My vegetables are not sufficiently different to others available in shops and supermarkets, so I cannot charge much premium, whereas the salad leaves possess extra flavours and qualities that are often remarked upon, helping to maintain both price and demand.

Even as it is, *I am subsidising my vegetable growing with other activities*, such as day courses and writing, and our family income is helped by Susie's B&B as well as income from renting land and cottages. No need to

cry for us! But it seems odd to me that a well run, productive two acres, worked over the year with about two thirds of my available time, is so marginal in contemporary economic terms.

Charles has grown vegetables without soil tillage for two and a half decades. More information is available on his website: www.charlesdowding.co.uk