

# Organic farming in the Mallee: making a dream come true

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A NSW family of nine is carrying on the organic farming aspirations of a couple they met only five years ago.

Succession in farming can be a tricky business, even for blood relations, yet two unrelated families are proving that when convictions are shared combine, it is possible to continue a farming legacy and meet everyone's needs.

The fact that the enterprise is an organic farm in the Mallee makes the story even more intriguing.

It all started with John and Jenny Schwarz, who were successful conventional farmers near Taplan, south-east of Loxton in the northern Murray Mallee before ill health due to chemical exposure forced a life-changing decision: leave the farm or convert to an organic system.

They chose organics, beginning the conversion to certified organic production of grain, sheep and cattle in the early 1990s.

It took several years to achieve organic certification and longer to see any financial reward, but John's health gradually improved and they progressively reaped better returns. When interviewed by SANTFA in 2010, Jenny said, "Even though our yields have been lower, the gross margins have been very good. Our expenses are less and we get paid a premium for our grain. And the decision to go organic has given us a much healthier lifestyle."

The couple farmed their property, Border Park, organically for 20 years, supplying grain to Laucke Flour Mills and meat mostly to the conventional market, with a small amount supplied to organic buyers, before they began to consider retirement.

With no family members interested in farming, John and Jenny hoped to see the farm continue as an organic enterprise with another family running it.

Enter NSW couple Josh and Peri McIntosh, who had grown up on conventional farms in north-western NSW but left to pursue other careers - Josh as a fitter machinist in industrial maintenance and Peri as a speech pathologist - and were looking to return to farming life.

"We both wanted to get back on the land



JOSH AND PERI MCINTOSH ARE ENJOYING THE CHALLENGE OF ORGANIC FARMING IN THE MALLEE AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK TOGETHER AS A FAMILY WITH THEIR SEVEN CHILDREN.

but realised that was impossible without a huge amount of money behind us, which we didn't have enough of to make a decent start," said Josh.

The family, which now includes seven children, were however increasingly exploring organic principles on their small holding near Bathurst.

## The biggest challenge to weed control with organic farming is excess rainfall.

"As we started having children and were thinking about raising and feeding them we became more and more interested in where our food came from," said Josh. "We had a bit of a hobby farm lifestyle with a house cow and a big garden.

"We decided that if we were ever going to fulfil our dream to farm we wanted to do it organically and in fact wouldn't farm at

all if we couldn't farm organically. We just didn't dare to believe the dream would come true."

But it did.

In what both families describe as a Godsend, they met when a relative of Josh's married one of John and Jenny's daughters. This serendipitous meeting sparked a relationship that has seen the McIntosh family take on the Schwarzes' 2,393ha mixed farm in a lease-to-buy arrangement.

The working relationship began in 2011 with Josh and Peri working for John and Jenny as part of a three-year trial and mentoring arrangement set out in a progressive, documented farming agreement. They also took on and invested in the sheep enterprise as share farmers, which enabled them to become certified as organic operators with the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Australia (NASAA). This

initial period provided Josh and Peri with a unique opportunity to learn the ropes directly from John and Jenny and in 2014 they took on responsibility for the whole farm.

“We had an understanding that met both of our needs, with us learning about organics and getting a start on the land and John and Jenny achieving their wish for the farm to remain organic, as well as providing for their retirement,” said Josh. “I guess it is a bit like a family succession, but without the family relationship.

“It was a foot in the door for us. They had the generosity to provide us with a start on the land, which we wouldn’t have got otherwise. They gave us the gift of opportunity.

“John and Jenny are an inspiration to us in many ways. They work together as a team, with communication being paramount in their relationship. They actively care for others in their community and live very close to their faith and convictions. Those values have been the keystone in making this whole succession work, and remain vital for our families working together into the future. If we keep the other party’s best interests in mind we can maintain and strengthen the relationship.”

The lease-to-buy agreement, a six-page document drawn up by Rural Solutions in Freeling, factors in land and equipment value and allows Josh and Peri to progressively purchase parts of the property over time.

Now in their third year as lease-holders, they admit that returning to farm life hasn’t been easy. “It has been a very steep learning curve for us,” said Josh. “It’s not only a different district from where we grew up, but we’ve had to learn about organic farming in the Mallee from scratch. Because we both came from conventional farms, there wasn’t a lot of knowledge we could transfer.

“John has been a real help; he’s good to work with and is very generous with his time. I also think you learn a lot more under pressure than if you’re just coasting along. Having John still involved gives me confidence as I continue to learn.”

The succession hasn’t been all smooth sailing.

“I guess we face all the challenges that come with farm succession. John and Jenny have had to go through the process

of leaving Border Park after 40-plus years and we have had to learn an almost overwhelming amount in a short time,” said Josh, who has just completed a Diploma in Agribusiness Management through Regional Skills Training Pty Ltd.

**Organic farming is still seen as a bit weird, which I can understand because I grew up on a conventional farm.**

One of the concepts the McIntoshes found difficult to grasp was that, for an organic farmer in the Mallee, weeds are friend, not foe. On Border Park, Weeds are controlled with cultivation and provide almost all the nutrients for the soil. “We can’t do without weeds because we don’t have access to tonnes and tonnes of organic fertiliser,” said Josh. “Plant growth in the two years between crops is vital for soil health, nutrient cycling, nitrogen and carbon build up, erosion control and livestock production. A weed-free stubble between crops is the last thing I want to see. In our system, practically any growth before ploughing is good growth.”

The cropping enterprise is based on a three-year rotation, with a two-year break between crops. In the second year after a crop paddocks are worked slowly with a one-way disc plough after a rainfall event.

This buries the weeds and over time returns nutrients to the soil as they decay. “The three-year rotation means we don’t get a crop income from the same bit of ground for two years, but we do get a return from the sheep and cattle and it means the nutrients build up for when we do plant a crop,” Josh said.

“We could crop every second year but we would slowly go backwards on some soil types, until we had patches in the paddock that weren’t performing.

“Going out to three years means there is time for the decaying weeds to regenerate the soil. Buying organic fertilisers would probably allow a two-year rotation but would also reduce our profit margin and increase our risk.

“With the current system, if we have a really bad year we can still break even and very rarely go backwards, which would happen if we were to put a lot into crop and then have a bad year. So even though we’re reducing our potential yields with a three-year rotation, we’re reducing our risk a lot as well.”

Soil health is also maintained by spreading very low rates of gypsum, dolomite and basalt sand on some paddocks to correct mineral deficiencies. The McIntoshes are continuing the Schwarzes’ system of annual soil testing. “It’s a rolling system that eventually covers the whole farm. We have more than 20 years of consecutive soil tests to go by and apply minerals according to those results,” said Josh.



CATTLE AND SHEEP GENERATE VALUABLE INCOME ON BORDER PARK AND HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN WEED CONTROL.



Nitrogen is supplied by medics, legumes that were seeded at Border Park in the 1950s and have persisted, regenerating in winter each year. "Medics provide most of the nitrogen for our crops and are also very good for fattening stock. They regenerate everywhere, except where they get eaten down or where the stock camp. We spread a bit of seed every now and then in areas where that happens."

Josh plans to trial organic fertilisers like chicken manure but doesn't know yet if it's an economically viable solution long term. In the meantime, weeds remain the most effective way of cycling nutrition and improving soil condition.

The most common weeds on Border Park are wild turnip, onion weed, wild sage, native grasses and ryegrass, with woodier, carbon-rich weeds welcomed due to the degree of organic matter they provide. "Summer weeds are not such a problem," said Josh. "They're not competing with the winter crop."

Weed control starts with a heavy disc to turn over the top 75 to 100mm of soil, leaving the weeds to break down. When weed seeds germinate on the cultivated country Josh uses a rod weeder to cut the roots beneath the surface. This low disturbance system, which is repeated two to three more times before seeding, progressively reduces the number of weed seeds, leaving a relatively clean paddock. "Every time you use the rod weeder there are less weeds and it's fairly clean when you put your crop in, which means it will

be another 12 months before most of the weed species we are controlling get a chance to re-establish."

Josh estimates he spends about the same time rod weeding as no-till farmers spend spraying. "Generally, our objective is not weed eradication, but weed displacement. We try to open a window in the natural cycle of the plants in our paddocks so we can plant a crop. The crop then has the best chance to compete and dominate, which is all it has to do to be profitable."

To maintain the sandy loam soil structure, Josh cultivates only after a rain, which can inhibit the system if a dry year means weeds have to be left uncultivated.

### The biggest challenge to weed control with organic farming is excess rainfall.

Good weed control opens the way for use of the disc seeder John Schwarz bought from Serafin Machinery in 2010. The Semeato TDNG 420 from Brazil is a 4.4m wide, 26-row machine with double-disc openers and press wheels.

With good weed control ahead of seeding, Josh was able to use the disc seeder to sow oats into wheat stubble in early March last year. "We'd had a few workings before seeding and a lot of the ryegrass and turnip had been worked out, so we took the opportunity to sow early oats straight after wheat, which was quite effective," he said.

The disc machine is used primarily to sow no-till feed crops and some rye and triticale on highly erodible ridges. Josh considers it too small for larger-scale seeding because it takes a long time to sow a large area with the narrow machine and its 1.8t seed box, but finds it useful for seeding on ridgetops where it can achieve good seed placement on the often undulating surface.

He currently seeds about 100ha of a total annual cropping program of 750ha with the disc machine.

"The main reason we don't use a disc as our main seeder is because it doesn't give you weed kill at seeding," said Josh. "I would like to try a 12m air seeder with independent disc heads for good seed placement and a full sweep for weed kill. Maybe one day."

The farm's main seeder is a Smale 12m Multivator bar with 250mm sweeps on 230mm spacing, with a scatter plate under the down tube to spread the seed across the full width of the shares. The Smale seed box holds 5.2t of wheat in four bins with independent metering belts and has a small seeds delivery system for over-sowing medic.

Josh and Peri grow mainly wheat and rye plus some oats and triticale, most of which go to organic vineyards and home millers for use as seed or for milling. They are following John and Jenny's practise of trialling a new wheat variety every couple of years, but at this stage their main varieties, which include Frame, Correll and Yitpi, were bred when there was less reliance on herbicides and are good competitors with grass weeds such as rye and brome.

The McIntoshes generally store all their grain on farm in twelve 50t silos and eight smaller seed silos, with eight field bins as back-up storage. They keep about 36t from each harvest for seeding the following year because it is not viable to source old wheat varieties or organic seed in the quantities they require.

They seed approximately 750ha of the 2,300ha property each year.

Border Park is divided into 26 paddocks ranging in area from 17 to 200ha. In a system set up by John Schwarz, the paddocks are classified into three groups, with a spread of soil types in each grouping. "It gives you a spread right across the farm, so a bit of every soil type and about the same area is cropped every year," said Josh.



WORKING PADDOCKS SLOWLY WITH A ONE-WAY DISC PLOUGH AFTER A RAINFALL EVENT BURIES WEEDS AND RETURNS NUTRIENTS TO THE SOIL AS THEY BREAK DOWN.



MEAT, AND MONEY IN THE MAKING.

The McIntoshes also run about 80 cattle and up to 850 sheep, which generate an important part of their gross return per hectare and are used to 'target' weeds, Josh said. The cattle devour paddy melons 'like lollies' and the cattle and sheep enjoy ryegrass at any stage of its growth, which is a win-win for the farm since ryegrass is a weed that helps fatten the stock. The livestock also keep skeleton weed under control, preventing it from taking too much nutrient from the soil.

Organic meat has become an integral part of the Border Park Organics enterprise since the McIntoshes took over, with Peri driving this aspect of the business.

**One of the concepts the McIntoshes found difficult to grasp was that, for an organic farmer in the Mallee, weeds are friend, not foe.**

John and Jenny pioneered a market for small quantities of beef and lamb sold direct to consumers, but most of their livestock was sold on the conventional market. With increasing demand for organic produce, Josh and Peri saw an opportunity to expand the organic side of the meat enterprise and have set up a website with online purchasing capabilities. Their organic meat sales have tripled since the web site was launched.

"We thought it was a bit of a shame to sell livestock on the conventional market when there's a huge demand from people wanting organic meat," said Josh. "The

initial challenge was how to handle the marketing, ordering, payment and promotion. Setting up the website kind of removed that bottleneck but has created another one, which is livestock handling and meat distribution."

Some of those issues involve on-farm infrastructure, with better facilities and systems including yards and transport options needed to handle more animals. How to ensure the right number of animals is market-ready at various times of the year is also a significant issue, but distribution is proving critical. "The market demand is certainly there, but it's the meat distribution that has been the real challenge," said Josh. "It's a full-time job for someone to organise meat logistics."

The McIntoshes work with 12 refrigerated transport groups to deliver to Adelaide, Melbourne, Bendigo, Mildura, the Mid North of SA, the Riverland, into northern SA and the Northern Territory.

They receive a better return from organic markets than conventional sales, and always endeavour to meet demand for organic meat wherever it is. "Even though it's more work, we'd rather supply organic meat where someone wants it, even if the return was the same as what we would get on the conventional market," said Josh.

Broad-scale organic grain farming remains an exception to the rule in the SA Northern Mallee, with no other farmers following in Border Park's footsteps; something Josh believes is 'largely cultural'.

"Organic farming is still seen as a bit weird, which I can understand because I grew up on a conventional farm. Practically, it does take a brave step to go

into it, because of the risks, challenges and changes that come with converting.

"But I think globally, if the organic industry continues to go the way it is, the market will dictate its future. People will invest where there's a return and at the moment organic prices are very, very good. If current prices hold, or even if they soften a bit, then we're going to see organic farmers everywhere before long, because the returns are there.

"When John started out there wasn't much financial incentive to go organic. He had to convert because of his health, but nowadays it's very easy to sell organic grain and if that continues to strengthen, farmers will invest in it."



ORGANIC MEAT IS PROFITABLE AND DEMAND IS GROWING BUT MAINTAINING A FLOW OF MARKET-READY STOCK AND DISTRIBUTING THE END PRODUCT ARE PROVING SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES.

Josh believes the Mallee is an ideal environment for organic farming due to its rainfall, soil type and land value.

"The biggest challenge to weed control with organic farming is excess rainfall. Rain that falls outside of the cropping window can't be utilised as well by the crop," said Josh.

"Our rainfall is predominantly over the winter growing period. On average, 60% falls during the growing season so the water is mostly confined to when the wheat can use it and there are less weeds over summer."

The sandy loam that is the predominant soil type on Border Park is also beneficial due to its inherent water efficiency, according to Josh.

"Crops on this soil type utilise the low rainfall very well. Crops on heavier soils,



like clay, need more rain to get going, whereas if we get two to three millimetres the plants can usually utilise it because the soil allows the water to reach the roots quickly."

Despite lower production per hectare in the Mallee than in most other farming regions in Australia, Josh believes land values make the Mallee an attractive place to farm. "It is one of the few places in the world where you can buy land at a price that allows you to pay it off in two years

if things come together for you," he said. "As far as return on dollars per hectare, it's actually very good here. It's an attractive place to make a start. Having said that, there is also the risk of a run of bad years that would make it almost impossible to continue without a few good years behind you."

For Josh and Peri, farming in the Mallee has also allowed them to create a cohesive family lifestyle. "With the trade work I was doing before, and with Peri working

as a health professional, we were almost living in parallel worlds. Now we're farming we can work as a team. She's as much involved as I am and is really passionate about the farm, especially the cattle. The children have taken it on well too. The older ones are a huge help with the sheep and cattle. It's challenging, but we love the opportunity to work together as a family"

"That's probably the best thing about it all."



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