

ORGANIC Farming:

conscience or commerce

by Phoebe Man and Phyllis Lee

At first glance, the fields look exactly the same as those in the other farms in the area.

But on closer inspection, it is apparent the soil is dark brown, rather than the conventional yellow. There are also some shading nets covering the vegetables and greenhouses protecting the tomatoes. This is, in fact, an organic farm.

Farmer Leung Poon-kin, 60, owns the 1.6 hectare Healthy Organic Farm. He says chemical fertilisers turn soil yellow and his dark soil is proof that his produce is organic.

According to the Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre, 69 local farms have received the Organic Resource Centre Certificate since 2004. The centre says the number of organic farms and customers buying their produce is increasing. Its figures show 90 per cent of those interviewed in 2008 had bought organic products before, a threefold increase from a survey four years ago.

Leung, who has been a farmer for over 30 years, turned to organic farming in 2000. He explains that before 1997, the Hong Kong government restricted the amount of imported vegetables from China, so local vegetables fetched higher prices.

“In the past, the wholesale price of local lettuce was HK\$60 per kilogram during Lunar New Year,” he says. “Sometimes, we even earned about HK\$300,000 a day.”

However, after the handover, cheap mainland vegetables poured into the local market. He could no longer earn a living from growing conventional vegetables.



Leung Poon-kin is proud of his organic produce.

“Pests are the major obstacle in organic farming,” Leung says. He explains that without using chemical pesticides, there are too many earthworms. They plough the mud and destroy the roots of vegetables, starving them of water and causing them to die.

According to Leung, organic pesticides are useless because the earthworms will return the next season. Hanging beans and melons on shading nets is the only effective prevention method, but this greatly increases costs. A shading net costs him HK\$200,000.

Amy Kwong, who is responsible for the marketing of Healthy Organic Farm, says that production costs account for 80 to 90 per cent of the farm’s total income.

Kwong says organic fertilisers are more expensive than chemical ones. At the farm, they need at least 30 packs of organic groundnut cake per month, which costs a total of HK\$7,800.

Although they do not earn much from organic farming, Kwong says they stay in the business because they want to produce healthy, quality vegetables for consumers.

Healthy Organic Farm is not the only organic farm struggling to be

profitable. Cheung Sau-kam is the owner and farmer of Kam Che Organic Farm, a smaller farm of around 2,000 square metres.

Cheung faces the same problem of high production costs and has some additional problems as well. Sales are bad, she says, because they are limited to the weekly Tai Po Farmers’ Market. If she is unable to sell all her vegetables on the market day, she is stuck because she does not have either the resources or the workers to sell them elsewhere.

Yet she stresses she will continue to practise organic farming in spite of all these challenges because organic vegetables are better for people’s health.

Cheung is not the only one to put conviction before profit. Tam Keung, who raises “nearly organic” pigs and fish under the brand name Healthy Flavour, has not given up his idea of providing healthy, quality food to consumers despite incurring financial losses.

Tam says that food scandals in the early 1990s inspired him to cultivate better breeds of pigs and fish. At the time, farmers’ excessive use of chemical pesticides caused food poisoning.

“How can primary producers sell poisonous food to consumers?” he says. “You’re earning their money, but you provide them poisonous food. How can you be that immoral?”

Tam says that raising organic fish is extremely difficult because external factors, such as water quality and the source of feed affect the fish. He only feeds his pigs and fish with soy beans and rice bran, which makes them healthier than other commercially raised animals.



Conventional farmland (left), organic farmland (right). Leung says chemical fertilisers turn the soil yellow.

After putting seven years of efforts into cultivating pigs and fish, Tam says it turned out that sales were disappointing.

Three years ago, many pig farmers surrendered their livestock keeping licenses under the government's voluntary surrender scheme. The scheme was introduced to reduce the number of pig farms in Hong Kong in order to reduce public health and environmental pollution concerns. However, Tam chose to stay in the business and expected his pigs could be sold at a higher price due to the reduced supply of local pigs.

After spending a lot of money on tests that showed his pigs are better and healthier than others, he found that consumers could not accept the high selling price.

Sales of the fish are much worse than for the pork. Tam opened a congee shop, Healthy Flavour Congee, in Causeway Bay, serving up congee with his trademark fish and pork. But at around HK\$40 a bowl, business has been slow. He also sells live fish



Bottles wrapped in yellow stickers are used to attract and kill flies.

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in his congee shop. However, he only manages to sell around 10 fish a day, which is just a 10th of the amount other fish shops sell. He explains that, due to the influx of cheap mainland fish, Hong Kong people are not willing to buy his fish, which cost twice as much.

"Hong Kong people only focus on the price, but not the quality of produce," he says.

Tam admits he has lost a lot of money on cultivating the fish and pigs. "It is good to earn money for sure, but I will keep working on healthier food even though I am not making a profit," he says.

While farmers like Leung, Cheung and Tam see organic and healthier farming methods as a way to offer better, more environmentally friendly food, some see organic farming as a commercial enterprise.

Wong Ling, the owner and farmer of the 5,300 square metre Wo Dei Farm, treats organic farming as a way to make more money.

He engages in organic farming because he believes it is a great opportunity to invest in a growing trend for consuming organic food.

According to the Vegetable Marketing Organisation, organic vegetables cost on average at least 70 per cent more than conventional ones. Some conventional farmers switch to organic farming because they want to earn more.

"We don't want to talk about farming organically. We're engaging in a business and organic farming is only our means to make money," Wong says.

He says it is impossible to talk about conscience when engaging in a business because it is such an abstract concept. Instead, Wong believes organic farmers should stick to corporate strategies.



A greenhouse is effective to protect tomatoes from pests.

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Wong also says it is foolish to talk about insistence on farming organically while incurring losses, since business is a matter of calculation. Farmers need to set a limit on how much they can afford to lose, otherwise they will end up losing all their capital and be forced to quit farming altogether.

For Wong, as long as farmers view organic farming as a business, there should be no significant difficulties.

Contrary to what other organic farmers say, Wong insists that in his case at least, the costs of organic farming are not very high. He explains it costs several thousand dollars a year to rent a piece of farmland around the size of a football pitch. He says organic fertilisers cost about HK\$1,500 monthly, which is only 10 per cent more than the chemical ones.

"Those organic farmers who face a problem of high production costs lack organic farming techniques," he says.

However, Wong admits it is very difficult for organic farmers to open stalls selling organic produce in markets due to keen competition from shops selling conventional products.

He explains that organic farmers cannot offer numerous types of vegetables because the varieties they can grow without resorting to pesticide use are limited. For example, Hong Kong

people like to eat flowering cabbages throughout the year, but flea beetles are active in summer, so it would be hard to grow pesticide-free flowering cabbages during that season.

"Housewives are used to buying vegetables from a wide variety of choices. If you offer 10 types of organic vegetables while conventional stalls offer 30 types, customers are dissatisfied and most of them will definitely consume the conventional ones," he says.

He adds that conventional grocers claiming to sell organic vegetables make matters worse. Wong says many grocers claim to sell organic vegetables even though they are selling conventional ones. As they charge lower prices, consumers choose to buy vegetables from them.

"If you want to make money from a stall in market, the only way to do it is to mislead consumers."

"Judging from the retail perspective, selling organic vegetables solely is a blind alley. If you insist on that, you will end up losing a lot of money," he says.

Wong then suggests if organic farmers really want to make profits by opening organic stalls in the markets, they should resort to less-than-honest sales practices. He says they could secretly sell both organic and conventional products without distinguishing between

them. Farmers could put all the vegetables together without classifying local organic, imported organic and conventional ones. They could even sell ugly vegetables as this would make consumers believe that they are organic and be willing to pay the higher price.

"If you want to make money from a stall in market, the only way to do it is to mislead consumers," he says.

Wong claims even some grocers who have obtained certification from the Hong Kong Organic Resource Certification Limited - an independent body assessing whether the production process of food can be classified as organic - pass off conventional vegetables as organic ones in order to earn more.

Pad Chu Pui-kwan, the chairperson of the Sustainable Ecological Ethical Development Foundation which was set up 10 years ago by organic farmers to promote organic farming, agrees there must be some certified organic farmers cheating consumers by selling conventional vegetables.

Chu says the certification system cannot guarantee the quality of organic products because it only looks at the production processes employed by a farm.

Instead of resorting to cheating, Chu hopes her fellow organic farmers will persist through hard work and constant self-improvement.

"You cannot make quick money from organic farming," she says. "Farming is practised through trial and error. You can only grow well by learning from past experiences." ▽



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What is (certified) organic food?

- Focus on the maintenance of natural ingredients
- No chemical fertilisers or pesticides
- No artificial materials
- No genetically modified seeds or plant materials and fertilisers

Source: Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre



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1-3: Organic produce grown by Wong Ling and Leung