



Alan and Kate Bird, organic arable farmers at Chertsey, sheep, cattle, wheat, barley, linseed, peas, carrots, sweet corn, oats and buckwheat.

## DEMAND DRIVES ORGANIC CROP GROWTH

Alan and Kate Bird are organic arable farmers at Chertsey, on the Canterbury Plains near Ashburton. Alan can distinctly remember what initially motivated him towards organics. “I was sitting on the back step pulling on my boots and the smell of chemicals in the air was so strong I felt sick. I went back inside and said to Kate, ‘there has to be a better way’.” Before long he was growing organic process peas, linseed, and buckwheat. “Things snowballed from there.”

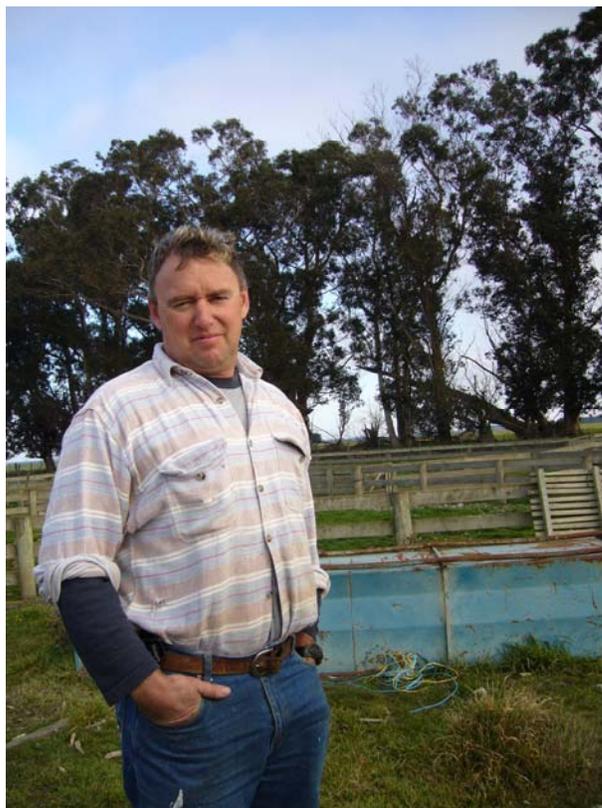
Alan says that arable farming, like all things organic, is having its day in the sun after some years of difficulty. Cropping farmers rely on rotations with pasture and stock to replenish soil structure and fertility, so need to have about half their farms in pasture – but until recently Alan was able to find only an irregular premium for organic lamb or beef, driving down the whole farm return. In the last few years, however, premiums for organic lamb have reached as high as 100% – and beef 20% – above conventional prices. This, along with very favourable premiums for crops, has made Alan’s organic cropping a profitable venture.

Alan loves the fundamentals of what they’re doing – they have 250 hectares of good soil on which they run 570 ewes, cattle and grow a range of organic crops such as wheat, barley, linseed, peas, carrots, sweet corn, oats and buckwheat. They also graze organic dairy cows from the West Coast in winter. He usually grows pasture for three years then crops for four years before returning the soil to grass or lucerne based pastures. The farm was “dryland” until three years ago, when Alan invested in irrigation which gives him more crop options and is a good insurance against the often-dry Canterbury summers. Irrigation is not without its trials – he has noticed the weeds like the water too, especially fat hen which has been an issue in the corn. A flame weeder was used with some success, along with an interrow cultivator.

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"In organic farming time is your greatest friend and can be your worst enemy," says Alan. Time is a great friend when using false seedbeds (a technique where a paddock is prepared for sowing, then left for a flush of weeds that can be killed with light cultivation, before sowing commences), but an enemy when you have to wait for favourable weather before harvesting a crop such as linseed. Linseed can be a problematic crop for harvesting regardless of how it's grown – conditions have to be dry and warm before heading can be done – and the birds love it while you're waiting, Alan says.

Alan is a great enthusiast of 'effective microorganisms', an organic treatment of microbes which promote healthy plants, prevents disease and speeds up soil organic matter breakdown, while releasing nutrients. He finds it incredibly effective for both preventing and curing rust on cereal crops – and says it is of great benefit to linseed. He has also found some impressive alternative fertilisers, and combinations of organic fertilisers and microbes that have additional benefits such as controlling grass grub.

Alan has several specialist markets, such as supplying grain to an organic chicken farm in Nelson, and linseed to Functional Wholefoods in Geraldine, which they use for linseed oil. The oil is particularly high in Omega-3 fatty acids and is considered to have significant health properties. David Musgrave of Functional Wholefoods can't get enough organic linseed – he could take "five to five hundred times" the amount of certified product that he receives at present – and is paying \$2100 per tonne – more than twice the conventional price.

Demand has risen sharply for nearly all organic arable crops in the last few years and Alan believes that it is now a sellers' market. "The other day I was asked what I would be prepared to grow feed wheat for," says Alan incredulously. "It's never been like that before." This reflects the increasing demand for organic products and a shortage of supply. Premiums for grains and pulses have also reached 100% and although costs have also risen, Alan says returns from organic arable farming have never been better. All in all, Alan thinks it's not a bad life – being your own boss and getting paid good prices for growing food without chemicals.

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*Healthy organic carrots as far as the eye can see.*