



Michele Cherry and John Grater,
Stonecircle Organic Farm,
organic vegetables and herbs.

STONECIRCLE ORGANIC FARM

Growing organic vegetables and herbs is a long way from midwifery and kindergarten teaching, but Michele Cherry and John Grater love their new life as organic market gardeners. Michele and John have a 5 hectare property called Stonecircle Organics near Amberley, north of Christchurch, where they grow over 30 varieties of vegetables and herbs. They sell the produce through a box scheme, at the Waipara Valley Farmers' Market, to an organic shop in Christchurch, and directly to local restaurants.

Michele and John bought their land in 2005, having only had a backyard vegetable garden before, and started growing on half a hectare to see what was possible. After a successful season, they now have a full hectare under cultivation, including three relocatable tunnelhouses for tender crops such as tomatoes, salad herbs and early potatoes. "We did jump in at the deep end, but wanted to learn and apply new things slowly," says Michele. "Now we feel it's working, and every year we can improve our growing techniques to have more nutritious vegetables. It's exciting!"

Michele notes that water is a limitation to the size of their operation. They have a well allocation of 3,600 litres per day, and tank capacity for 70,000 litres of stored water. In a dry summer, they could use more, and they are looking at increasing water storage capacity and more efficient irrigation equipment such as the Ein-tal micro-sprinkler.

Even in early June there's an impressive array of vegetables in the ground that will supply the box scheme for much of the winter – half a hectare of brassicas, leeks, beetroot, celery, parsnips, parsley, silverbeet and spinach, and salad greens under cover. One area that had vegetables over the summer is in a green manure crop of oats, vetch and peas, and another area is being prepared for sowing garlic and onions.

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Michele and John proudly display their winter vegetables.



Winter vegetables and one of the relocatable tunnelhouses

Weeds, especially twitch, have been a problem, and a consultant helped Michele and John with a weed control strategy. Regular cultivation with a small tractor and tines brought the twitch to the surface, to be desiccated by the sun, and then a green manure crop was sown in February. John believes the approach is working feels they are in control of the problem.

Michele and John are certified through the Organic Farm New Zealand (OFNZ) Small Grower Scheme. They enjoy the contact with other members of their “pod” – five other locals with organic businesses ranging from garlic to beef.

Michele and John aim for small scale and sustainable approaches in their business. One tunnelhouse is simply made of double-weight microclima frost cloth stretched over plastic hoops. Inside they have added seaweed and hay, which acts as both a mulch and nutrient source, in which a dozen chooks can often be found scratching around.

Selling the produce is also a source of great satisfaction. “We love the one-to-one contact with customers – and the direct feedback on the produce is much more meaningful than taking a crop to a supermarket,” says John. They pride themselves on the freshness and seasonality of the produce – the vegetables are picked on market day or the day the boxes are delivered. “We have found people really want the basics – potatoes, onions, brassicas, carrots, salads. We also grow herbs and some novel things that sell well at the market, but the basics are our mainstay,” says Michele.

Michele and John are happy with the results of the summer, saying “we always felt confident we could make it work financially.” They also feel that they were at a good time in life to start their business – although there are disadvantages at starting such a business in middle age, they have no longer had dependent children or a mortgage.

“We feel we came into organics at an optimum time – OANZ support began just as we were starting up, and there seems to be a much greater awareness by the public of organics,” says Michele. “We feel lucky to have had the support.”

“We also feel that this is how food should be grown – seasonal produce grown for the local market. And this is what people should be doing with lifestyle blocks near the city – we can make a living, and grow vegetables for lots of other families on 5 hectares. We make good use of the fertile land we have here.”

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Salad leaves ready for picking.



One of Michele and John's tunnelhouses with salad crops.