

# How was it for me? And what are my hopes for the future?

## Collette Haynes

If we're talking about the weather – then not as bad as last year! Still bad, but not as bad. But as we're growing in the South East and everything is relative and, as one fellow grower kindly pointed out, at an organic growers alliance event, we are effectively living in the English equivalent of the Riviera. So we won't complain. Suffice to say too much rain, not enough warmth or light, and a brand new pest in the shape of squirrels of all things.

If we're talking about The Market, which I believe at this conference we are. How was the Market for us .....then.....?

What is this thing the market in a market economy?

To help myself compose an answer I thought I'd try and define the term Market to describe how it has treated the organic sector

The Market:

- The economic, social, cultural, spiritual and emotional
- Supreme Governing Force (that exists in a monetarist, free market economy) which all products, concepts, ideas and causes are ultimately absorbed by and are at the mercy of (through the process of marketisation) and once there are duplicated, replicated, redefined, robbed of meaning and are (should fashion dictate) potentially destroyed.

The market as a media driven, Meaning Munching Monster. The sort of robber of meanings that can take a picture of Che Guevara and turn it into a T-shirt design to entice us, not to campaign for equality, but to shop; to consume. Because we live in a society whereby it is no longer 'I think therefore I am', but I shop therefore I am. We are what we eat and we are what we shop for.

The market as a sort of fickle monster that a few years ago lifted on high the word organic, offered favour, flattered, showed very clear signs of being our organic friend. Allowed the organic movement to surf the globe on a wave of popularity. All and only to leave it now feeling a bit washed up, stranded, and beached in a place we didn't really mean to be.

Obviously, there is no such definition or monster but not many things remain still in a free market economy and you could be forgiven as an Organic Producer for seeing things this way.

When Peter and I started our box scheme in 1994 we were the only box scheme in our area of East Sussex. There was no competition but there was also no readymade market. We leafleted in a few areas but basically built the scheme up slowly by word of mouth. We currently grow on 18 acres, and in three polytunnels, a mix of vegetables, which supply our box scheme. We started in 1994 doing 10 boxes, peaked about 10 years later at 480 but have since declined in numbers –for a variety of reasons- to about 330.

We have just stopped the boxes until the middle of February in order to give ourselves some time to reflect and take stock. We're hoping in what now seems like an unfeasible short space of time to work 'on' the business rather than in it. To reorganise, restructure and most importantly work out where we want & can go with it in the future. Work out a way of keeping the farm and the business ecologically, economically and humanly sustainable, given the current weather patterns, economic climate and our age.

## So HOW HAS IT BEEN FOR ME?

On a personal level: and perhaps surprisingly, if I had been asked this question 18 months ago you would have got a much bleaker response and outlook than I have now. After 13 years of operating the box scheme, one 5 day family holiday in Cornwall (in February) and not a great deal of disposable income to support living in the South east, the Passion and belief that inspired us to do the job we loved was wearing a bit thin. I personally was reaching crisis point and was beginning to turn into a kind of female version of Basil Fawlty.

For instance; At a kind request for more swede recipe's from a box scheme customer, who was struggling with winter roots, my inner Basil Fawlty would be thinking.

The Basil within:...

“RIGHT, you want more swede recipes do you? Let me get this clear. You want me to search out the cheapest, most reliable organic swede variety, or if not apply for a derogation for a non organic variety. You'd then like me to get Peter to sow the swede, weed the swede? Is that the case? Then pick it, pack it AND deliver it to your door! For what? Shall we say 50p per swede??? How long have you been on the scheme? 5 years!! Remarkable quite remarkable that you still don't know what to do with a swede. I suppose you'd like me to come into your home and cook it for you would you!! IT'S A SWEDE FOR GODS SAKE JUST EAT IT. YOU WOULD IF YOU WERE HUNGRY”...

There isn't even a parallel universe where this sort of reaction makes sound business sense. Not even if you are only thinking it. This state of mind is an alarm bell.

But it wasn't just the incessant graft getting me down. My self image and faith in what we do was also being whittled away. Box schemes and organic had finally made it big in the media. While we were quietly getting on with growing veg the terms organic and box schemes had entered the Market place. Swallowed by that aforementioned Monster. Initially we were glad of the interest and full of boasts that we never had to advertise because the wave of interest was out there. We had made it into the mainstream. All we had to do was wait for everyone to see the light and convert their farms & their lifestyles to organic. I suppose we were tempted into complacency by A) the belief in what we did and B) the lifeline it offered for our business survival. At a time when many conventional small, mixed farms and market gardens were hitting the wall. Or in response to the crack of the consumer whip, were 'diversifying' (ie doing anything but produce food - B&B, caravan storage or in our part of the world particularly – pony paddocks), we felt like the lucky ones.

But even back then we felt a sense of unease. The media which steers the market monster reflects back to you an image of yourself and the one that was most often reflected was the 'organic as health to you' aspect. Primarily, no doubt, because scare stories sell newspapers. Marketeers also tend to think of us as a self-interested lot and appeal to the what's in it for me motive. Of course anyone who grows or farms organically knows that there's not that much self interest about it. I mean if there was we'd just buy some round up and then go and have a cup of tea. And anyone with their eye on the global ball, which the organic movement certainly has, would see instantly that the only real scare story was that a large part of the world's population still didn't have anything to put in its mouth, organic or otherwise. For those already with a prejudice against organic this was easy fodder for thinking us precious and elitist. I remember at this time, getting one magnificent put down from a German artist in Brighton. As Peter delivered a veg box to a friend who shared her studio she asked..” What's this, tch, an organic vegetable box....what's wrong with you....do you want to live forever? She did later become a customer on the grounds of freshness and taste but it served to highlight the alternative perspective that was to form the ground swell of the backlash.

Another undermining consequence, for Box scheme operators, of the Monster market hall of mirrors was that it distorted out of all proportion the Box itself. It was as though the Box itself became the most important thing. It was no longer a means of connecting with or supporting a local farm but just making sure you got a 'box'. Local greengrocers started doing boxes, which contained neither, local or organic veg. Supermarkets ventured into boxes!!! Which, of course, they are perfectly within their rights to do if it helps support themselves. But from our perspective it kind of missed the point.

But this distortion of The Box, did something else. It became well and truly – a lifestyle product. Suddenly we were producing a product. Which had semiotic meaning. A box said something about you, it spoke market language over and above what it was in real substance. The Independent ran a large double page spread associating organic boxes with the super rich & the new EcoTories. For a while everyone wanted one & it was a consumer must have. But if you buy the product without fully absorbing the principles can you really handle what's in one. Can you really eat that much swede and cabbage in the winter? The novelty for many quickly wore off and a murmuring began that boxes weren't all they were cracked up to be. Peer pressure can be a powerful market force. And another thing. No matter how super rich you may be food should by rights always be 'affordable'. You can always justify cancelling your box by claiming alarm at the price. Regardless of how it was produced. Especially if you never quite manage to muster the imagination and culinary inventiveness to eat one. If you're buying a box from fashion motives you might not find the time to cook it and unless you really are super rich, few could afford to feed their compost heap that much.

But did any of this really affect our business? To be honest probably not. Not directly. We run an old - fashioned style box scheme, deliver to drop off and collection points, and only allow the choice of a spud or a no spud box. Our scheme members are what market men might call the deep greens. They exert their power of consumer choice to choose us. They're great.

And even the increased competition from the big fish, the national box schemes didn't touch us too much. Some for sure in certain districts but we've also gained from their advertising by catching customers converted to boxes by their marketing campaigns but who were now in search of something more local.

So what was the problem? For me more than anything, more than the dream turning into a hard graft nightmare, more than the media driven market distorting and misrepresenting what we do, more than the non organic-copy cat competition was the fear that we weren't living the dream but an illusion. An illusion that it could be done. That the little and the local could survive the economic jungle and uphold the organic principles at the same time. In a market economy based solely on price competition the system is definitely against you. You cannot compete with economies of scale and economic efficiency is often at odds with environmental efficiency. Were we failing the cause? Was our practice good enough? Were we taking too much from the soil? If you're jack of all trades you're master of none. Growing veg would be enough of a job but economic pressure and the very nature of box schemes, dictates that you have to sell the stuff as well. We have a great direct relationship with all our scheme members whose loyalty we rely on but the relationship if the truth be told wasn't really working for us. We were having to bend over backwards, sideways and upside down to make it work and yet we still weren't sure we were doing it well enough.

### **How do I feel more positive now?**

Well, the first thing that happened was that the Organic Growers Alliance journal popped through the letterbox. I can't stress enough the power of solidarity.

Suddenly we were not alone. There before my very eyes, information on better growing skills, a definition of the craft, shared values, common issues, and most importantly a shared perspective. A self determined organic perspective. A voice

It reconfirmed in me that organic, is not about lifestyle products but is a perspective. It is a different way of looking at the world.

Seeing this producer perspective voiced again had a powerful effect on me. It not only renewed my faith in what I was and what I was doing with my life but also revived in me the energy of resistance which tends to be essential to the heart of an organic grower. We thought we had been absorbed and gone mainstream. We thought we were at the mercy of the market. Hence my earlier definition. But what came out of hearing the voices of other growers aware that the organic message and principles were being lost in the market place – for me was that Markets are only monsters if you let them be. In a Market lead economy they can be like teenagers if you give them all of the freedom and power without any of the responsibility. Markets, the media, consumers, even supermarkets and any body or organisation you care to name are in theory fine if they choose to filter their motives or actions through principles (such as fairness) first.

But we have been living through extraordinary times. Ever since the Monetarist Thatcher revolution we have learnt to look at our lives from a market perspective. To think that “there is no such thing as society, only individuals”. To think of ourselves - as consumers. So much so and so often do you hear it on TV – that an alien, having done it’s research before landing could be quite forgiven for introducing itself: “Greetings consumer, I come in peace, I mean no harm to you or your potential younger markets.”

But the truth is we are not consumers, we are human beings. We are not markets we are communities. Consumer choice is not the same thing as true democracy or fairness. It is not a civil right. And a system that relies primarily on price and competition – to me is just a classic Divide and Rule policy. The planet and its resources are not for sale and The Market despite all its volatile might cannot immunise us against the consequences of our actions or the power of nature. No matter how much it may distract and opiate us into an illusion of processed & manufactured plenty.

The organic perspective, on the other hand, based on the IFOAM principles of fairness, care, health and ecology, does not see the world as a resource for a shopping opportunity or profit but as a living system. A perspective, that is by definition, not elitist. It is a movement and practice that humbles itself to the whole, and encourages co-operation and consideration not competition and exploitation. We have lived too long without principles to filter our actions. Profit and economic growth do not suffice. The organic movement can offer these principles -not just its products– and can have uses and repercussions beyond its application to agriculture.

So for me it was a case of AT LAST! A noble cause again. A rediscovered reason not to down tools. Just, yet. Quite how I had forgotten seems absurd now, but I can only think that the workload involved in organic production had temporarily focused my mind away from the bigger picture.

### **What are my hopes for the future?**

For our own personal future we have given ourselves January to work out how Ashurst Farm is moving forward. Last June I ran a survey amongst our scheme members asking them the very same question – How is it for you? Because, if box schemes are about community, relationships it’s important not to get complacent. It’s important to keep working at them. And as communication is the key to a good relationship it was important for them to have their say and for us to listen.

What became clear to us was that our scheme members don’t believe everything they read in the newspapers. It didn’t matter what the media or monster market was saying about organic. What mattered was their relationship to the farm. It was one of our drop-off’s years ago who said to me that the box scheme was like a marriage – that coping with seasonal variety really was “for better or worse”. This

commitment, this loyalty, this willingness to have a share of the harvest, to delight in and be inspired by what there is, is a mindset of values that will be needed by more and more people if the credit crunch gets much crunchier.

We had thought of knocking the box scheme on the head but after listening to their responses, letting them down would be hard. And because box schemes reconnect town & country; see the rural economy as part of the community, they themselves are a system of distribution that fly in the face of that competitive, divide and rule, gladiator ring that is the free market economy. They inspire loyalty without the use of loyalty cards or air mile offers. Which makes them currently the best market security we've got.

### **My Hopes for the future - for the market at large, and the organic movement?**

I feel strongly, that now is not the time to lose confidence. If the media and the market have a misconception of who, what and why we are then we need urgently to set the record straight. We need to reclaim the definition of organic. We mustn't become a victim of the market monster; change ourselves to appease it or popularise ourselves as Organic Lite, or a gardening club.

Let's always be open for debate and up for change because debate is what keeps a perspective alive and dynamic. But to dilute or tame our selves when it's the market that's making the mess would – given climate change, peak oil and the credit crunch be ecologically irresponsible.

We need to market our message and our principles. We need more people to look at the world from an Organic Perspective. We need to make our own waves. The market may have been kicking and spitting and calling us names of late but it may well be its dying throws. As banks are bailed out and panic buying encouraged it seems more evident that the market is not the All Powerful, Supreme Governing Force capable of leading economies after all. A victim no doubt of its own lack of principles. What will follow in its place is an unknown but the Organic Perspective and movement would do well to enter the debate. To encourage policies which will create a much fairer, healthier, careful, ecologically considerate society than we have today.

A free market that has created a culture that has become consumer heavy and producer thin. Likes its food cheap but its shelter unaffordable. Considers profit, size and consumption as the only yardsticks of success. Which promotes cheapness and price as the only politically correct kindness you can offer its people despite inequalities of income and exploitation of labour at home and abroad. A society, that values too little. Wastes too much and has a shockingly high budget for slimming products.

There is an abundance of grass roots activity from Transition towns, the W.I, church groups and green groups all struggling to re-grow local networks of food production and community and yet somehow Organic is not always included in their missions. Purely because they have been persuaded by the market – or those that benefit from the divide and rule policy that to charge a marginally higher price (for food not housing) is to be an enemy of the people! Those very same people paid a pittance (immigrant labour?) to produce the food. And so production is culled, or dies off quietly unless it sells itself with 'added value'. Made fancy as pickles, baked or strung up as sausages (involving more work, to make produce more expensive – and so render it miraculously 'affordable' and attractive to the market). While your basics, of low cost food are brought in at the expense of food miles.

Does this seem overly critical? We have come a long way after all. Lets not pretend that the systems that came before the free market offered perfect alternatives. It has allowed economic fluidity and personal opportunity but at what cost? You could say we are at just one stage on the arc of change but the balance needs to be redressed. The organic movement can and must act as a voice on the Rights of the Planet.

The Basil Within: ...”Oh, Splendid, splendid! Another bloody job”... Just when I thought it was enough to grow organic veg, and spoon feed it into some culinarily, challenged client. Remembering to take a picture for the web site so we can be seen to be doing it, as much as doing it, you now want me to go out and take part in the Eco revolution. Fine. Leave it to me dear. You wouldn't want the 'power of the people' to mess up your hair do!  
(Basil now exits stage left to the kitchen garden to lob swedes at the squirrels)

Obviously, what the Organic Movement needs more than anything right now is to make friends and influence people. Clearly Basil is not our man. In fact we'll need all of the qualities Fawltly lacks. We'll need to promote principles without seeming pompous. Set standards of best practice without appearing puritan. All things- that the Soil Association and now the OGA journal, already promote in abundance. It's just that somehow we need to get that perspective beyond our natural supporters and out of the control of the media & marketeers. Stop the majority of people seeing organic as a product choice.

I'm hoping of course that the more people who can take on board the movements founding principles will naturally then create the expanding market for our produce that we so need. Hoping that market security will become a valued and fair exchange for food security. That economic diversity, skills and crafts and the real relationships that exist in local food networks will become as valued as bio diversity.

I'm also hoping that such a noble cause and an expanding organic market, plus the long term effects of promoting growing in schools will enthuse, inspire and support a younger generation to take up organic production. Hoping perhaps that ironically the unaffordable price of land will encourage co-operative farming and C.S.A's so that responsibility and workload will be shared. So that 'inner Basil's' will become a thing of the past.

The Organic perspective is far from being elitist. It is as inclusive as it could possibly be surely? Neither is it a complicated message. Our standards and practice may seem it but the bottom line is that we just Love Life and hope to preserve it in all its diversity.

For instance if you were to get into the spaceship with that alien that came down who had mistaken you for a consumer. And you travelled with it to another planet for an alternative shopping opportunity you would be able to look back at the bright jewel of home, with its swirling weather patterns and shifting tectonic plates and witness that it does indeed harbour organic life.

You would also see that despite the ever-changing weather, the evolutionary shifts, the constantly changing ideas, economies and cultures. Despite the fact that not a single atom that makes up that vibrant organic mass ever remains still, not even for a millisecond. You would see much more clearly that we are without a shadow of a doubt;

‘one and indivisible’.

And as you sped away at the speed of light homesickness would set in and you would long for more than anything that it would be as every bit alive and vibrant; as richly abundant and fertile as when you left it.

The Cyble Fawltly Within; “Well of course you would dear. You'd have to have someone to show off your new alien lifestyle products to wouldn't you.....Are they organic? No dear but they are local. They're all from the same galaxy!

P.s For the record, can I say that in the winter months we only ever put swede in our boxes once every three weeks AT MOST!