

Profile:

SA Organic Strawberries Lobethal, South Australia

Dr Angela Atkinson, Berry Industry Development Officer, Victoria & South Australia

Plamen Paraskevov and his wife Sonja Bognarova grow certified organic strawberries in Lobethal, in the beautiful Adelaide Hills.

Plamen studied agronomy at the Agricultural University in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, before specialising in organic farming, through undertaking a Master of Science from Wageningen University in the Netherlands. After graduating, he worked on a number of international projects funded by the European Union, focused on introducing organic farming practices to Central and Eastern Europe.

In 2001, Plamen moved to Australia while Sonja followed in 2008. Plamen worked with NASAA (The National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia) in several capacities, including as an organic inspector and on the inspection review committee. He also helped convert farms to organic production, including a vineyard, Temple Bruer Wines, and a broadacre farm, AW Go Organics, before setting up some trials to start his own small organic market garden.

Their first small block of organic strawberries was planted in the 2010-2011 season, and the strawberry plantings slowly grew from 1 acre to a planting now of 25 acres of certified organic strawberries. Plamen says it was a rocky road to get to where they are, and it continues to have its ups and downs, although they are far more experienced now to deal with problems that come their way.

From the beginning, all the crops they have grown have been organically certified, and they say they would not consider any other production system. They believe that growing organically is viable enough to be a profitable production system for commercial production. This is in contrast to the often-held perception that 'organic' is a bit 'hippie' and is restricted to local markets where high prices are often paid for produce that is not great quality.

Plamen and Sonja aim to supply supermarkets with quality produce at a reasonable and affordable price, and with the expansion of their organic strawberry production, they now are direct suppliers to Woolworths and Coles.



Plamen, Sonja and their Rhodesian Ridgebacks, Katie and Adria. Photo credit: Angela Atkinson



The farm at Lobethal in the Adelaide Hills. Photo credit: SA Organic Strawberries

At present, they are certified organic with NASAA Certified Organic (NCO). The certification process through NCO is rigorous, and for a product to be Certified Organic it must be produced in line with strict Organic and Biodynamic Standards. This includes specifying all inputs that go into producing that product, and scrutinising all production methods.

From his previous work as an organic inspector for NASAA, Plamen says a common mistake some producers make is expecting that the certification body will teach and guide them how to farm, or correct their methods of farming. As with any other on-farm audits, the inspector's role is to audit compliance of the practiced farming methods, in this case to the current Organic Standards.



Organically certified strawberries

Photo credit: SA Organic Strawberries

One of the biggest issues in organic farming, not just for strawberries, is the lack of commercial quantities of certified seedlings and seeds.

Organic producers need to seek derogations, or exemptions, from the Organic Standards in order to use conventional seeds and seedlings, or in the case of strawberries, runners produced by commercial runner growers.

These exemptions are granted when it can be shown that organic plant propagation material is not available in sufficient quality or quantity.

In their production system, Plamen and Sonja use the same density of plants as conventional growers, roughly 8 plants per lineal metre, giving them optimal production while still allowing for successful disease control. The biggest challenge in organic production is weed control, especially in early spring when all plants are growing vigorously, including the weeds.

Control of insect pests and fungal diseases is also challenging, but can be managed holistically by employing a variety of methods. They have recently added an area of diverse plantings of native and other



flowering plants, and vegetable crops to attract and maintain beneficial insects in the production area. These plantings do play a role in harbouring beneficial and neutral insects and they have expanded them further with six new beds in the new strawberry area.

Soil-borne diseases such as Charcoal rot, *Verticillium* and *Phytophthora* are a challenge for the whole strawberry industry, not just those growing organically, and Plamen says they can lose a large number of plants every year to these diseases, which decreases productivity. This can be a problem with commercial production of any monoculture crops, not just strawberries, under any management system.

Plamen is working to reduce the impact of these soil-borne diseases by methodically implementing proper crop rotations and using other methods to keep them at bay.

Natural fertilisers are used to improve sustainability on farm, despite these fertilisers being bulky, and not always preferred in production horticulture. Plamen says that by using natural fertilisers they are able to achieve good levels of nutrients in the soil and don't need to add large quantities of fertilisers through fertigation or foliar sprays.

Their business philosophy revolves around improving quality, turnover and production efficiency, which is reflected in an affordable end price for their customers. They want customers to be able to choose organic produce because of preference, and not be deterred by the price.



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