

# The Greening of Hong Kong

words ailee slater

Organic farming is starting to catch on as people become more health conscious.

When Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, people didn't realise the terrible effects of pesticides such as DDT. After all, these chemicals were promoted as cheap, easy to make and perfectly safe for humans. Carson, a scientist as well as a writer, showed how pesticides in farming led to cancer, premature births and environmental destruction.

Nearly 30 years later, the organic movement came to Hong Kong, with a group now known as the Produce Green Foundation. In 1989, they created the city's first organic farm.

There is no one definition of organic farming. It can mean prohibiting chemicals in fertilisers and pest controllers, minimising pollutants on the farm and in food or simply adopting a mindset that values ecological harmony and diversity above profits.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Dr Simon Chau is co-founder and current chairman of the Produce Green Foundation. He explains that 'the layman's understanding of organics is growing things without chemicals. But this is basic. On some farms there is a strict requirement that everything should be entirely natural.' This can mean avoiding all preservatives in food packaging and maintaining fair conditions for labourers.

bc was surprised to learn from Chau, and other sources, that soil care is a huge aspect of organic farming. Pesticides, not to mention environmental pollutants, can have serious effects on the soil. Polluted or mistreated earth can't hold water or nutrients as well as healthy soil, leading to malnourished fruits and vegetables. Chemical fertilizers can be used to stimulate the growth of these plants, but more chemicals simply exacerbate the soil problem.

'There is an international understanding that we should take good care of the soil... this means composting, as well as other methods,' says Dr Chau. 'We must not over-exploit the soil by growing things too closely together or failing to rotate crops.'

Idy Wong, Head of Sustainable Living and Agriculture with Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden, agrees. 'We try to focus on soil conservation, keeping soil healthy so you can have good production,' she states.

She also agrees that organic farming is more than just prohibiting the use of pesticides. Besides keeping soil healthy with compost, she explains that it's important to grow diverse crops; this leads to more nutritious soil, and counters some of the pest problems that often occur in monocropping.

Monocropping is the farming technique used by many non-organic, industrial farms in which a single crop is grown, year after year, on the same land.

Genetic engineering is used to determine and plant only the highest yielding varieties, which leads to even less crop diversity.

The problem with monocropping is that if a farm grows just corn, say, insects that feed off the crop will have an abundant food supply and, without other crops nearby, few natural predators. Thus the only way to destroy them will be through chemical pesticides. The bugs tough enough to survive this chemical warfare will reproduce, leading to generations of stronger, more resistant insects.

In organic farming, the diversity of plants is a key component of the system. Aubergines, for instance, may be grown next to squash, which are, in turn, grown across from rows and rows of different types of lettuce. This diversity in plants means diversity in insects, and pest populations are kept in check naturally, thanks to the predator/prey ecosystem. Organic farming further avoids the pest problem by working within eco-systems. Farmers grow fruits and vegetables that are native to a particular land, and therefore there is less chance of unknown pests and diseases being introduced or the crops needing special care.

Wong mentions another disadvantage to monocropping and mass-production farms – air conditioners. 'When you grow one crop, it means growing that crop off-season, often in air-conditioned greenhouses.' This is clearly bad for energy conservation, but also for the plants themselves, leading to the need for chemical fertilisers and growth supplements. 'It's important to grow what's in season and think about what nature allows,' she says.

With all of this obvious concern for organic farming, it may be surprising to learn that Kadoorie Farm has not applied for official organic certification. In fact Wong says that Kadoorie do not hold to certification as their activities are based more on their philosophical belief. The farm strives to educate visitors and community members about personal organic farming, and Wong says that if Kadoorie applied for a certificate, it might pressure smaller organisations into doing the same.

At the moment, farms that participate in the Kadoorie-organised produce market at the Star Ferry Central Pier are not all organically certified; instead, Kadoorie representatives will visit the farms to ensure their produce is being grown in an organic manner. 'We follow strict protocols,' Wong maintains.

In fact, no international boards regulate organics, meaning that every country must decide on its own system of certifying organic farms. Just recently in a scandal in China, American manufacturers discovered that a supposedly independent group in charge of surveying organic farms was funded and regulated by the Chinese government. The situation greatly angered the Americans who had been selling the produce as organic.

In Hong Kong, the main certification group is the Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre. To be certified as organic, a farm must follow a raft of standards such as avoiding burning on farmlands, discontinuing the use of prohibited substances such as synthetic pesticides and other chemicals, and demonstrating a respectful attitude toward plants and animals in the local ecosystem.

Although Wong sees the need for international regulation boards, she says that one reason Kadoorie isn't too concerned with certification is that Hong Kong is so small. 'Here the consumer has a chance to get to know their producer,' she says. 'We do not need a certification mark on this produce, because everything is transparent. The consumer can visit the farmland.'

She also points out that imported organic food is often certified, but that doesn't make it the best choice. 'Local farms have other values, like food mileage and fresh air.'

This point of view reflects a major trend in organic farming – that of growing, buying and eating local. Dr Chau concurs that defining organics is less important than making an effort to live by its

philosophy of simple, local food. 'Our long-term goal should be more than going organic... it's about scale, and thinking about agri-business,' he says. He encourages the idea of personal farms, which he says are better environmentally and economically: 'We must go back to a state where everyone of us grows food on our own.'

Making a personal connection with nature and farmed vegetables might seem incongruous to Hong Kong, a city with little available space and few residents harvesting turnips from their back gardens. Even as little as 10 years ago the government discouraged organic farming here, says Dr Chau, but has now done a complete U-turn and is actually promoting it.

According to him, the reasons for this change include the government's desire to cultivate a green image for the city as well as ongoing food scares in Mainland China. He points out that much of Hong Kong's food comes from north of the border where things are 'much less safe'.

The idea of organic farming does seem to be gaining popularity across the territory. The Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre reported just 19 organic farms in 2001; in April of this year, the Hong Kong government listed 376. This figure includes both family farms and "self-claimed" organic operations, but it nevertheless indicates that the attraction of local produce based on organic values has clearly taken hold.



Organic farms throughout Hong Kong offer classes, tours and support to people looking to start their own farming operations at homes, schools or as community gardens. At the Tung Chung Green Organic Farm on Lantau, budding farmers pay annual and monthly fees for use of land, seeds and tools on the farm. This operation, established by the YMCA, hopes to promote community bonds and provide assistance to those out of work.

But would people really pay money for the privilege of working on a farm? 'Yes, absolutely,' says Wong. 'We have more than 100,000 visitors per year [at Kadoorie], and our monthly farming courses are fully subscribed.' She explains that with people more and more concerned about personal health and the environment, farming itself is becoming more popular in Hong Kong. 'People see farms as a day out... to enjoy the countryside.'

Chau, too, has noticed this shift. 'When President Jimmy Carter said, "I am a farmer," it was not translatable in Chinese,' he notes. 'People didn't understand how an American president could call himself a farmer. Now people love green fingers; everybody is going organic... Hong Kong is catching up with this international trend.'