

How salad leaves can feed a family

This farm family in Cork produces a healthy crop and a healthy income from just five acres

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Originally from Dublin, Rory and Sheila Magorrian, moved to north Cork in 2001 and purchased the 20 acre, Kildinan, farm in the rural hills surrounding the village of Ballyhooley.

“When I was made redundant from my printing job in 2009, my wife Sheila and I decided to start our own business growing vegetables and mixed salad leaves,” says Rory. “We had a keen interest in growing vegetables and were keen to make the most out of the farm. I completed a horticulture course delivered by Jim Cronin based in Killaloe, Co Clare, and made the decision to convert part of our farm to organic production.

“This time also coincided with the arrival of our two sons, Dylan (nine) and Sean (eight).”

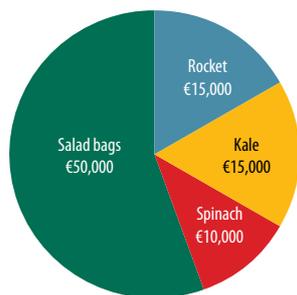
Organic

The farm was entered into a two-year conversion period with an organic certification body in 2012 and, in February 2014, the farm achieved full organic status. “We began by growing a wide range of vegetables, salad leaves and organic eggs and supplying these direct to local supermarkets,” says Sheila. “We also operated a local box delivery scheme and sold produce at a local farmers’ market.”

During the last year, a number of changes have been made including:

- Financial turnover has been maintained by streamlining production and marketing to concentrate more on “higher-value” salad crops which are now supplied directly, and exclusively, to seven local retail supermarkets in Co Cork.

Figure 1
Annual turnover (2017 estimate) for Rory and Sheila Magorrian



- Labour usage has been re-organised so that the enterprise can operate with two employees (husband and wife, Rory and Sheila) down from three in 2016.
- A new blueberry orchard has been planted which will literally start to bear fruit from 2018 onwards.

Economics of the business

Turnover for the enterprise for 2017 will be approximately €90,000. “Income is relatively constant throughout the year,” says Rory. “The main costs amount to €15,000 to €20,000 per year and include packaging, printing, labelling, diesel for deliveries, seed, compost, electricity and infrastructure upkeep.”

Land details for Kildinan Farm 2017 - five acres total

Crops	Acres
Field scale vegetables – kale and spinach	2.0 acres
Cloches (movable polythene tunnels): Four in summer – lettuce, rocket; Eight in winter – spinach, some lettuce	0.5 acres
Polytunnels (five) including one for plant propagation: salad/lettuce leaves, some domestic veg.	0.3 acres
Orchard – blueberries (new)	0.1 acres
Total salads/kale and spinach	2.9 acres
Green manure crops (to build soil fertility) Red clover, buckwheat, phacelia (mainly field scale)	2.1 acres
Total	5.0 acres



Keys to success

It is clear that Rory and Sheila generate a decent income from a relatively small acreage. Rory says: “I am constantly learning, researching and willing to try new things. We use polytunnels and movable cloche tunnels all of which I have more or less built myself. These help to extend the growing season and allow us to grow crops during the winter. Where there is the

The organic market

In Ireland, the demand for organic produce continues to grow and is now at its highest ever level (€150m/year; source – Bord Bia, January 2017). This is a growth of 22% in market size in the last year, making Ireland the second fastest growing organic market in the world.

One-third of total sales by value comprises vegetable and fruit. Approximately 75% of this is imported so there is an opportunity to supply more home grown organic produce. Traditionally, market outlets for organic fruit and vegetables were confined to farmers' markets and box delivery schemes but locally sourced organic fruit and veg has started to appear more regularly on supermarket shelves in recent years.

Experience shows that those who enter the sector with a good plan and passion for what they do succeed in selling their produce as the demand for quality locally grown organic fruit and vegetable is strong.

Organic horticulture in Ireland

There are approximately 400 organic horticulture operations in Ireland, which vary in size from back garden areas to intensive market gardening enterprises with high levels of mechanisation. In general, field-scale production is restricted to good arable soils with a suitable climate. Most production is in the east, southeast and the midlands. However, intensive production is possible in a much wider range of areas through the use of polytunnels.

Organic horticulture producers require skilled management and planning and a good marketing strategy. Often, an array of crops is required. This is necessary to implement an effective crop rotation to help combat weeds and disease and build soil fertility. A range of crops also helps to satisfy market requirements.

Organic growers must adhere to strict EU standards with restrictions in the types of nutrients, seeds and composts and other inputs. Normally, more land is required than for conventional production to allow for areas of green manure which help build soil fertility and control pests and diseases.

More information

Teagasc: www.teagasc.ie/organics
www.teagasc.ie/horticulture

DAFM: www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/organicfarming/

Organic cert bodies

IOFGA: www.iofga.org

Organic Trust: www.orgaictrust.ie



Teagasc specialists Andy Whelton and Dan Clavin with Rory Magorrian.

option, I prefer to purchase second hand equipment and machinery.”

According to Sheila, they combine their individual strengths to make the business work. “Supplying just the supermarkets may seem like a gamble but it frees up time for the farm and the family. Rory has done a lot of work on marketing and I do more on the administration and paperwork side. We each work 35 hours per week, which is less than when we were going to the farmers’ market and operating a veg delivery box scheme.”

Overall, what advice would Rory and Sheila give to anyone considering going into organic vegetable production on a small holding? Rory says: “The market is there but at the same time you have to work on it yourself. I believe the model operating on our farm can be replicated around the country.”

Sheila points out the difference in production standards between organic and conventional growing with organic growing requiring a more organised and planned approach to soil fertility, pest and disease management.

“Organic horticulture is not for the fainthearted. You must be willing to prepare for the possibility of crop failure... but we always take an educated gamble in such cases.

“Having a real interest in what you do and a desire to keep on getting better is the most important thing,” concludes Rory.



Sean (eight) and Dylan (nine) with some of the edible flowers produced on the farm.