

CARVING A NICHE IN ORGANIC FARMING

The demand for organic or sustainably farmed produce is on the rise. Johor is now home to a number of organic farms that are riding this new wave.





PHOTOS BY SAM FONG/THE EDGE & SREEREMA BANCO

1. Sweet potato is one of the vegetables grown at Zenxin's farm
2. Vegetables are nourished by compost
3. Each week, members collect a box of greens comprising eight types of veggies and a small box of micro-greens
4. Folo Farms' veggies

POP into any of the major supermarkets in the Klang Valley and you are likely to find a well-stocked section of organic vegetables, sourced both locally and from overseas. The prices are from 50% to sometimes 200% higher than those for conventionally grown vegetables.

There are a number of so-called organic growers in the market today, some with overseas certification and others that carry the Malaysian Organic Scheme label. But as a consumer, how can you be assured that the bag of sawi or kailan that you have picked up is really organic and, therefore, merits the heftier price tag?

This was the conundrum faced by Tan Sheay Way's family. Her sister had fallen ill with kidney issues, so the family was keen to source organic food. "We visited many organic farms, but found it difficult to find reliable producers," says Tan.

A conversation with close friends Will Chua, Tang Thian Yeong and Jason Lim led to the germ of an idea — growing their own vegetables to feed their families. This was how FOLO (which stands for Feed Our Loved Ones) Farms was born.

Joining forces with an organic farmer who was struggling with insufficient land, the enterprise started with a half-acre plot in Kempas. What they grew could feed 15 families. Before long, they moved to a 12-acre farm in Ulu Tiram.

"We started with friends and family. But through word of mouth, more people came to us for their vegetables," says Tan.

A community-supported agricultural initiative, FOLO Farms has about 100 members today, each of whom pays RM2,000 for a total of 24 weeks in return for a weekly supply of vegetables, comprising eight types of greens and a box of microgreens. All the vegetables are grown organically using compost made from food waste sourced from hotels and restaurants in Johor Bahru.

FOLO Farms has no plans to seek organic certification, says Tan, pointing out that its members have the luxury of conducting spot checks on the farm. "Some of our members even volunteer at the farm," she adds.

Having that assurance and consumer confidence is what those in organic farming seek and strive towards. Achieving that means educating the public on the agricultural practices of their farms.

In the case of Zenxin Organic Food, a pioneer in organic farming in Malaysia, not only is its entire production chain certified by the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Australia (NASAA) — a painstaking system that ensures the producer knows the source of all of its vegetables — it also runs farm tours.

In 2006, after about five years of organic farming, Zenxin opened the doors of its 100-acre Kluang farm



5. Composting is crucial 6 & 7. Zenxin's dragon fruit orchard and other herbs and greens

to visitors — aimed at engaging its customers and educating the public on the virtues of pesticide- and chemical-free farming.

“We wanted to do that because there were not that many organic growers at the time and people did not know what organic farming was really about,” says Zenxin executive director Tai Seng Yee.

Since opening, Zenxin Organic Park has hosted about one million visitors (mainly from Malaysia and Singapore), including school groups. On tours of the park, visitors go on guided walks to learn how the various fruits and vegetables are grown. They also get to harvest some of the greens. There are several activities for junior visitors, including milk bottle fish feeding, playing with rabbits and arts and crafts projects.

“We believe that it is the largest educational facility in Johor, where visitors see how vegetables are grown without chemical fertilisers and pesticides,” says Tai.

Reaching out to customers and prospective customers is also UK Agro Resort’s approach. The 100-acre farm in Kluang takes pride in being Malaysia’s largest goat and sheep farm, with 4,000 animals.

UK Farm Sdn Bhd founder and managing director Goh Un Keng started with just a three-acre farm in Batu Pahat. He raised 2,000 goats and his success caught the attention of the Ministry of Agriculture, which encouraged him to expand his operations.

Today, UK Farm — like Zenxin Organic Park — is part of the Kluang Modern Farming Project aimed at encouraging agricultural ventures that adopt the latest technology and agricultural practices and adhere to high standards.

Goh points to the fact that its milking centre is one of only six in the world with the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification, which means it meets the highest standards in all aspects of quality milk production. Milk from UK Farm is sold in the Klang Valley, Singapore and Brunei.

Goh has won several accolades over the years, including at the Malaysian Livestock Industry Award. He also conducts courses on goat management for students of Universiti Putra Malaysia and Singapore’s Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Nanyang Technological University.

Although it is not an organic farm, Goh stresses that UK Farm’s ethos is rooted in zero waste. “Goats eat grass and then fertilise the grass. There is zero waste and we recycle as much as possible,” he says.

Goh, who started the farm in 2007, says the aim of expanding into the agro-tourism business in 2010 was to showcase the farm’s successes and demonstrate to visitors what a modern farm looks like. On the farm, visitors can opt for a day trip that includes visiting the goat pens, taking part in feeding activities and observing the milking process. They can also stay overnight at the chalets or dormitories to soak up the pastoral setting.

Over the years, the number of visitors has risen steadily, from 20,000 in the first year to about 70,000 this year. Almost two-thirds of them are pupils and students. The farm also attracts visitors from coun-



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8. Goats and sheep on UK Farm
9 & 10. Milking time at UK Farm
11. UK Farm hosts many school groups

PHOTOS COURTESY BY UK FARM AGRO RESORT

tries such as Singapore, China, South Korea, Japan and the Middle East.

“We get a lot of school visits and we welcome these because by experiencing the farm, the children then go on to tell their parents about the visit, what they have learnt and about the milk produced here. So, we are really reaching out to the hearts of our future consumers,” says Goh, adding that word of mouth has been its main promotion channel. “Our visitors also post their photos on social media. This increases awareness of the farm.”

GETTING A NETWORK TOGETHER

Although organic farming is a growing industry, Tai stresses that it is not a booming one. “The industry has been growing steadily,” he says.

The leading supplier of organic greens in Malaysia and Singapore, Zenxin produces 15 types of crops on its farms (located in Renggam, Kluang and Lojing, totalling 215 acres), including leafy vegetables, beans, gourds and herbs. The company also raises hormone-free chickens and antibiotic-free eggs.

Zenxin has opened 12 retail outlets in the country. There, it sells its farm produce and more than 400 types of organic products such as mulberry leaf tea, noodles, beans, rice and spices.

With its experience over the years, about seven years ago, the company embarked on the Zenxin Organic Grower Groups. Through this initiative, the company buys produce from other organic farmers at a fixed contract while helping them improve their organic farming practices.

To qualify as a member of the grower group, the farmers are vetted by Zenxin and their farms are visited by an inspection team that conducts soil and water tests. Members of the grower group are subject to twice yearly audits and annual audits by the NASAA.

The initiative covers 60% to 70% of the organic farmers in the country and is a move in the right direction in terms of ensuring that those involved in this adhere to stringent farming practices, says Tai.

Assistance and support can come from less than obvious sources. FOLO Farms, for example, has been receiving positive feedback from property developers keen to start urban farms in their residential and township developments.

Tan believes that property developers can play a role in ensuring that sustainable and organic farming practices are more widespread. “For example, if they can subsidise a farm, this can ensure that farmers get a decent wage, which will attract the right talent to the industry and bring up the level of farmers, much like artisans,” she says.

By raising standards, perceptions about the agricultural industry can change. And this, she points out, is a win for all. ● *By Sreerema Banoo*