

PERSONAL RECORD RICHARD CLARE

Sheffield Organic Food Initiative is an umbrella title for several connected projects.

I myself have been pursuing the goal of developing local organic food growing for the past 10 years. Initially, I had no background in any aspect of cultivation, but felt that it could help to solve many problems, environmental, social and personal. My first aim was to simply prove that I could produce any food at all by organic methods. I contacted as many sources of advice as possible and commenced reading up on the many aspects relevant to organics, self-sufficiency, permaculture and recycling. I was disappointed to find that there were no courses or training opportunities available in this field either in Sheffield or in the region as a whole. Hence my current knowledge and experience is largely self-taught and through the arduous but highly effective means of learning from my own mistakes. In the last decade several courses have been offered, a degree in broadscale Organic Agriculture at Hallam University and a variety of amenity based NVQ courses through Sheffield College. Neither of these provides either the practical experience nor the range of skills and techniques that I have been able to learn and master simply by my own pragmatic learning.

Having obtained an allotment on the outskirts of Sheffield, the first challenge was to source what seemed the key element, namely organic matter. Since 1988, I have co-ordinated a regular, weekly collection of vegetable waste from my local greengrocer. After experimenting for a couple of years, I settled on a simple method of chopping the material and combining it with animal manure, although I was initially wary of employing any animal products, and had enough success both with composting and vegetable growing to be confident enough to take on further allotments and expand the compost collection. For two years I used an old Volvo estate and then a Sherpa van to collect waste from 6 grocers in the local area, an average of one tonne [1000Kg] per week. At this point I was so committed to the idea of composting that I researched the possibilities for large scale expansion and worked on a business plan. I also compiled a brief report, outlining the potential for composting in Sheffield, which was submitted to the council's recycling officer but never taken any further. Having been unable to gain support for this project either from the local council or other agencies concerned with recycling, I decided that my time could best be dedicated to investigating the full cropping potential in terms of yield, variety and continuity of produce possible within the context of allotment growing. I treated this exercise as an experiment or research project and believe that many of the techniques and methods I have evolved are effective in this specific urban / allotment context. I have also kept records of all activities on a month-by-month basis and maintained plans of all the sites recording crops and cultivation annually.

From this modest base, I proceeded to become involved in other practical projects where I could apply the knowledge I had gained and extend the scope of my activities past the restrictive small scale of a single allotment. I have incrementally increased the number of plots I am primarily responsible for in partnership with a variety of friends and acquaintances; including the design, installation and ongoing maintenance of an allotment specifically for disabled and special needs users in co-operation with disabled care service staff. Since 1991, I have led the Ponderosa Environmental Group, which provided the opportunity to plant an organic community orchard of 30 fruit trees and also to make recommendations for edible landscaping to the council's landscape architects. Since 1994, I have co-ordinated the reclamation and running of a larger [2 acre] kitchen garden and orchard attached to a non-profitmaking conference center at Unstone Grange, near Chesterfield. These activities illustrate the point that there are many opportunities for access to cultivable land if the right expertise and sufficient commitment can be organised.

I have also been an active local campaigner for many aspects organic food-growing. In addition to continuing to lobby the council, I have also appeared several times on local radio and in local papers, promoting composting and organics. I have delivered several lectures and talks to local gardening groups. In 1994, I participated in the HDRA's Open Days scheme and received more than 400 visitors to the allotments. In 1992, I contributed to a video promoting recycling for Sheffield Community Recycling Action Project and in 1996, I helped promote allotments for the council's allotments officer on regional TV. I even stood as an Allotment candidate in local council elections in May 1994 to publicise the complete lack of allotment provision in the inner city area in which I live. Since 1994, I have regularly attended meetings of the local Health Authority's Healthy Gardening Group and have made many contributions including the setting up of a small grants scheme for organic gardening projects in Sheffield. Each year since 1995, I have arranged a display of organic allotment produce for the city farm's autumn produce show and judged their organic produce competition. I regularly advise new allotment holders on how to begin or improve their sites and have been consulted by Sheffield Wildlife Trust, the Earth Centre [at Conisborough] and the British Trust of Conservation Volunteers on allotment and orchard projects for which they have insufficient experience.

I now have a regular pattern of activities both on a weekly basis and seasonally throughout the year. I find that these routines of physical work, such as weekly composting or annual leaf-collection, combined with opportunities to teach others, at Unstone, and through leading an allotmenters group, is most fulfilling. I would estimate that I am active in some aspect of these projects for more than 300 days per year, only limited by bad weather and illness. On average, I am occupied with these activities for more than 40 hours per week, more during the spring and early summer, limited by daylength. In addition to physical outdoor activities, I also manage support services for these projects such as the bulk-buying of organic fertilisers and seeds.

Over the years, I have achieved the transition to commercial-quality produce across a huge variety of crops, which is so vital in convincing people that organic vegetables can equal others in size and appearance as well as being superior in flavour and nutritional-value. In collaboration with various colleagues, we have progressed to quite sophisticated achievements such as the collection of our own seeds [including many heritage varieties], the steady accumulation of over 100 orchard fruit trees and a collection of plants from the Agroforestry Research Trust [fruit and nut-bearing temperate climate species from all around the world]. All these projects have been minimally [insufficiently] funded. They demonstrate that it is possible to achieve a lot within restricted means, supplementing available funds by recycling and low-cost strategies. I can provide rough estimates of the cost of investments and value of outputs, and have many points to make concerning the economics and viability of such projects.