

GARDENER ELSKE HAGERAATS:

‘It can be done, a fair wage for farmers’

While supermarkets compete with bargain prices, some farmers earn no more than a pittance. Gardener Elske Hageraats devised a solidarity payment system that enables a farmer to earn a fair wage. ‘Instead of money for the vegetables, I want to be paid an hourly wage.’

TEXT MARIANNE WILSCHUT PHOTO DIEUWERTJE BRAVENBOER

Wild cabbage, oca, woodland sunflowers, paracress: there are lots of unusual vegetable names on the labels in the beds of the Ommuurde Tuin (walled garden) in Renkum, near Wageningen. But more familiar vegetables like Brussels sprouts, pumpkin, mangetout, and green asparagus feature on the labels as well. A lot of the beds are still empty. ‘We are busy getting ready for the new season,’ Elske Hageraats explains. She points to a strip of land: ‘We have just tilled the soil there so the compost gets

thoroughly mixed into it. And see that white stuff there? That is used straw and grain spawn from a mushroom grower friend of mine, which we use as a mulch layer on the rhubarb.

Hageraats is a self-employed gardener at this centuries-old market garden where pesticides and artificial fertilizers are banned. The agro-ecological business owes its name to the remains of a wall around the plot, constructed back when the kitchen garden was owned by King William III and his wife Queen Emma in the 19th century. >





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PHOTO SJOERD SCHIMMEL

From left: Elske Hageraats, Esther Kuiler (owner of the Ommuurde Tuin) and Marieke van Leersum (a freelance colleague) celebrate the Ommuurde Tuin's 20th anniversary in 2019.

‘Emma grew herbs here in her tea garden’, says Hageraats. Also dating back to those days is an old pear tree at the edge of the plot. ‘We still pick its pears for stewing.’

EDIBLE FLOWERS

The vegetables, herbs, fruit and edible flowers that are grown in the Ommuurde Tuin from May to October - some 450 varieties in total - are sold to restaurants in Nijmegen and Wageningen and in the Ommuurde Tuin’s own shop. They also go into the 90 vegetable boxes that customers collect every week. These boxes are no longer sold one at a time. As of last year, the customers, the 200 members of the garden, pay a sum of money to the growers at the beginning of the season. ‘We use

that to pay the lease on the land and for compost and seeds, and it also has to cover our labour costs,’ explains Hageraats. ‘Instead of asking for money for the vegetables, I want to see my costs covered and receive an average hourly wage. In this Community Supported Agriculture system (CSA), the customer is a harvest shareholder. That is fair because that way we share the risk. If part of the harvest should fail due to a hot summer, members will get slightly smaller quantities of vegetables in their boxes. In a good harvest year, the boxes will be fuller.’ The members pay according to their means. ‘Our target price for a single box is 16 euros, the minimum hourly wage for a self-employed person, because we reckon

that about one hour’s work has gone into it, in total. But ideally customers pay the hourly wage they earn themselves. So a financial advisor who earns 80 euros per hour should pay us that for a vegetable box. Not everyone is doing that yet, but at least we are now at the minimum wage.’ With the ‘solidarity payment’ she devised, Hageraats wants not only a fair remuneration for her work, but also to raise awareness. ‘We are as transparent as possible with our members about the hours we spend and the costs we incur. Many of our members were really surprised that we earn so little.’

TWO MSC DEGREES

The fact that it doesn’t pay well did not put Hageraats off going into farming after graduating from Wageningen. ‘I have always had a great love of nature. That is why I studied biology. As a student I organized the Farm Experience Internship, a kind of mini-internship at a farm. This course came out of a student initiative. That’s how I got to know the Ommuurde Tuin and started doing voluntary work there myself. It made me so happy to work with the soil and to be outdoors that I never wanted to leave.’ Hageraats took two Master’s degrees: ‘I was doing biology, but I missed the bigger picture there, so I switched to sociology. But by then I had got so far with the biology degree that I finished that too. I really like the combination of natural and social sciences. It enables you to talk to people from both disciplines. In the case of GMOs, genetically modified organisms, for example, I know exactly how they are created and what their social impact could be.’ The best thing about her student days was Wageningen’s international atmosphere. ‘Eating together, making music and starting lovely projects with the Farmers’

‘Large-scale arable farmers are interested in my idea of solidarity payments’

Group. Among other things, I organized a Rural Development symposium in Colombia with a Colombian PhD student. We had invited the government, farmers’ organizations and the FARC to speak online. WUR wasn’t keen on that, because they didn’t want to be associated with the FARC, a terrorist organization, but these were talks on rural development. And one of the lecturers said: ‘just do it’. So we persevered and it was a fantastic thing to have organized.’

After her studies in Wageningen, Hageraats took a vocational training course at Warmonderhof, a Dutch biodynamic agricultural college, and then started working at the Ommuurde Tuin on a freelance basis. She also teaches courses on agroecology for people who want to start their own garden. And she wrote the book *Eerlijk loon!* (Fair wage!), which contains inspiring examples of farmers’ campaigns for a better income, including those of the activist group Farmers Defence Force. She was helped with the research by Rural Sociology students from Wageningen. ‘They did an investigative study and came up with examples such as the ‘price scale’ in Amsterdam and the *Bieterunde* (bidding round) system in Germany, where members cover all the costs, including the farmer’s salary. All these examples from home and abroad gave me the confidence that it can be done, a fair wage for farmers. It’s not for nothing that community farming is on the rise. Large-scale arable farmers who sell their products through wholesalers or a supermarket have also shown interest in CSA and in my idea for solidarity payments.’

SUPERMARKETS

This is a way for farmers to bypass the supermarkets. The latter ‘are so powerful that they can negotiate low prices. This morning I heard an Aldi advert on the radio: “You pay less, but you get more”.

That is only possible through exploitation, in my opinion. It is shameful that they have the nerve to advertise that! The Court of Audit calculated in 2019 that a third of all farmers in the Netherlands earn less than the minimum wage. Without subsidies it would be half the farmers.’

Hageraats believes that the low remuneration of farmers is not just an issue for consumers and supermarkets. The government should act too, and not just by reducing the VAT on fruit and vegetables. In France, supermarkets are obliged to buy products that are available locally at a cost-covering price. This prevents supermarkets from buying up a cheaper, foreign batch instead. The Dutch government should do the same.’

SOLIDARITY LOAN

Hageraats is still pondering the possibilities for a fair wage for farmers. ‘I am now looking at how these ideas can be applied in other countries too. My book has already been translated into English, Spanish and Portuguese, but perhaps there are students who can translate it into another language. I am also in touch with a WUR PhD student in Colombia who has started a similar project there. The underpayment of farmers is an even bigger problem there. I gave him a solidarity loan so he could start the agricultural project. He has to repay that loan. But not to me, to the next person who wants to start an agro-ecological CSA, and so on. But even with a loan, it is still very difficult to get a solidarity wage project off the ground in rural Colombia, because poverty is a big problem there. So I want to suggest to our members that in addition to subscribing to our vegetable box, they also subscribe to a box in Colombia, which then goes to poor Colombians. That way we expand the community around the Ommuurde Tuin even more.’ ■



PHOTO DE OMMUURDE TUIN

ELSKE HAGERAATS

Elske Hageraats (33) is a gardener, teacher and writer. She works at the Ommuurde Tuin in Renkum and teaches the course ‘Agroecology in Practice’. She co-founded the Future Farmers Foundation and wrote: *Eerlijk loon!*, *solidaire betaling en andere boereninitiatieven* (Fair wage! Solidarity payment and other peasant initiatives).



Qualifications: WUR MSc in Biology and MSc in Development and Rural Innovation 2017; diploma in biodynamic agriculture, Aeres Warmonderhof college