



Photo: Author

Feeding the cows: their diet is a mixture of grass and clover, the basis for healthy animals.

Organic farming increases independency and creativity

Lieve Vercauteren

In the village of Lovendegem, in the province of East Flanders, Belgium, the Mouton family runs their organic dairy farm, *De Zwalm*. "This farm passed from my grandfather to my father, and later from my father to me", explains Dirk Mouton. "My father farmed cattle intensively, and when I took over the farm in 1983, I made an effort to expand and modernise the farm. In 1994 this all changed abruptly when all our pigs had to be destroyed because of a case of classical swine fever within one kilometre of our farm. That horrific experience made me start reflecting seriously about the current direction of agriculture, which values larger and increasingly intensive farming enterprises. I became interested in alternatives and started collecting information about sustainable and organic agriculture. On the farm, we became more cautious with the use of external inputs, especially chemical fertilisers and pesticides. At the same time, we were hesitant to go any further than that. I could not stand the idea that I had to spend my future days removing weeds by hand. By applying less chemicals, we considered that our milk was already a much better product. However, apart from feeling positive about that, there were not really any other benefits from our new farming approach. We could not sell our farm produce for a better price. Therefore, in 1998, we made the logical decision and took the big step to producing in a completely organic way. On the one hand, this meant that our production methods were even more eco-friendly, while on the other hand we would be enjoying a higher price by selling our farm products with an organic label."

Conversion

The Moutons' farm looks much different now. Their cattle herd consists of a mix of dairy cow breeds that produce milk

satisfactorily, with a high protein and fat content, under extensive management. A Brown Swiss cow, for instance, is capable of producing about 8000 litres of milk in a year, compared to 9500 litres under the previous system. It is also important that the natural features of these animals have certain advantages: their udders are not heavy and the animals have a long life span. Technically, the conversion to organic farming has resulted in a different way of working that not only requires a new way of thinking, but also different knowledge and information. An external advisor assisted them to develop a complete farm plan for the changeover, including planning the feed production scheme which was a central issue in this transition. They also planned how to develop an optimal feeding schedule for the cows. A big advantage was that the Mouton family owned enough land to produce most of the required feeds themselves. Apart from some organic feed concentrates that they buy (2 kg per day per animal), the animals are fed solely from plants grown on the farm.

Since the conversion, maize has disappeared from the cows' diet. The Mouton family now grows grains and a mixture of grass and clover instead. They do not experience any weed problems with this system, whereas by growing maize or beets organically (which would have been the main alternative), manual weeding would have taken up a lot of their time. Before ploughing the fields, cattle manure is applied and fodder grains are sown in April. This is rather late in the year, but it allows for a fast growth of the crop and which keeps weeds under control. A few days after sowing the grain crop, the grass/clover mixture is sown in the same field. After harvesting the grain crop, the grass/clover mixture is cut for silage production (grass which is cut when green to be stored for feeding the cows during winter) or directly grazed by the cows. "With

grass/clover mixtures I manage to achieve very good yields” claims Dirk Mouton. “In the rather dry summer of 2003, for instance, I had yields of 17 ton per hectare on this light sandy soil, with only 140 kg of nitrogen applied in the form of cattle manure. That is about double the production that conventional farmers achieve on the same soils, applying chemical fertilisers.”

Healthy animals

Dirk Mouton discovered that it is better to cut the grass/clover combination for silage production after it has received a few days of continual sun. Sunlight allows the grass leaves to produce more sugars. The higher the sugar content in the grass/clover cut, the better the fermentation process, which will allow for the feeds to be stored for longer. The quality of the grass in the grass/clover mixture is very important, since this forms the bulk of dairy animals’ diet. The cows are always fed a mix of different grass/clover cuts in order to increase the variation and quality of their diet. Early in the year, the grass/clover mixture yields fodder with relatively less protein and a lot of sugars. At the end of the cropping season, in autumn, this is exactly the other way round.

Apart from paying special attention to the quality of the feedstuff, the Mouton family makes sure that their cows are in good health by doing their best to prevent the animals getting infected with some common diseases. When kept inside, all cows and calves stay in open, well-ventilated stables where the animals can lie down on straw. This straw, the by-product of grain produced on the farm, is brought in fresh every day, and the stables are cleaned once every two weeks. Because the farm is not pursuing maximum production, the animals are seldom ill and easily come in heat without any special treatment. When an animal does become ill, they first attempt to solve the problem with homeopathic treatment, and only if that fails will they allow conventional medication.

Proceeds

The conversion of the Mouton farm to completely organic production was achieved in about one and a half years, the period officially set for the soil ecosystem to recover from earlier non-organic management. In June 2000, the first organic milk was delivered to the organic milk cooperative, the *Coöperatie Biomelk Vlaanderen* to whom they now sell about 80 percent of the milk for a much higher price than conventionally produced milk. Ria Mouton, Dirk’s wife, assists with the twice-daily milking activities. She is also responsible for processing some of the milk into butter, butter milk, cheese, yoghurt and rice pudding. These products are sold in their new farm shop to about 150 loyal local customers, as well as to another 50 families from the area who participate in “food teams”. The members of these food teams, which were started with the assistance of the Flemish development NGO *Vredeseilanden*, have organised themselves in such a way that different fairly-produced and organic food products are purchased every week directly from farmers. The products that the food teams obtain from local producers include vegetables, fruits, meat, bread and dairy products. Ria Mouton states: “Processing milk, selling the dairy products from our shop and participating in the food teams creates an important added value to our farm enterprise. Moreover, our customers and the wider community appreciate what we do, which has assisted us in making the changeover to organic farming”.

“There is no need for us to grow any bigger” adds Dirk. “Our family of four can live comfortably from the proceeds of our farm and that is enough. Now, I would rather continue growing in ecological terms in order to contribute further to a healthy environment. All our fields are within a catchment area for

drinking water. Each year, nitrate levels of the soils are checked, and on 50 percent of our fields it is always below 30 kilograms, far below the officially allowed figure of 90 kilograms. Based on that, we receive a financial reward from the government, but more than that, it gives me enormous satisfaction.”

Part of the farm’s profits are invested in ecologically-friendly farm equipment, including solar panels, machinery to clean waste water, and machinery for reusing warm water. “I became an ecological farmer” he says, “because I feel that the safeguarding the environment should no longer be rated as less important than economics. Cautious management of nature, the environment, and natural resources are essential. The milking equipment is cleaned three times, and I can re-use the first lot of water as drinking water for the animals, and the second and third lots for cleaning the stables.”

Farming more independently

“It has always been my dream to farm more independently,” Dirk Mouton explains, “no longer relying on commercial companies for my inputs or large factories for my output. Now that we produce all our feeds, and hardly require any commercial feedstuff, we maximise the profit we can get from selling milk with an organic label. This allows us to farm in an efficient and economically viable manner.”

After the decision was made to change the farm management drastically, they have not lost heart even once, because they made a deliberate decision. Farmers these days are confronted time and again with rules and regulations that they need to obey without any choice, and that they find much harder to implement. Before and during the transition to becoming organic producers, they received a lot of support and helpful advice from other farmers who had already made a similar changeover. Now that they have their own experience to offer, the Moutons are also regularly involved in supporting other interested colleagues who are considering a conversion to organic farming. However, during study meetings, which are commonly organised by farmer organisations in Flanders, many conventional farmers have shown a strong dislike towards the Moutons and other organic producers. A criticism often heard is that organic farmers are only chasing subsidies and that they “are taking a huge step back”, something that conventional farmers cannot understand. Furthermore, with all the attention paid to environmental concerns, such as soil and ground water pollution by agrochemicals, conventional farmers feel attacked and therefore distrust the organic farming sector. This disapproval hurts, of course, and the Moutons are now tired of explaining what their real motives are for producing in an ecologically-friendly manner. They have stopped going to general farmer study meetings. Instead, they invest their time and energy in meeting with concerned consumers at annual “open farm days”, and in June of this year they will participate in the *boerentoeeren* (farm tours), where a bus full of interested consumers will visit several farms to learn about the source of the food they eat. ■

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