

Organic Farming: A Family Farm

Organic Farming in Ireland

Organic farming is a specialised system of farming whose aim is to produce high-quality food naturally while ensuring that potentially harmful synthetic chemicals are kept out of the food chain. Organic farmers must comply with comprehensive [rules and regulations](#) developed for environmentally friendly and sustainable crop and livestock production. Additional standards ensure that a high level of animal welfare is adhered to and protects the environment.



Organic production is “An overall system of farm management and food production that combines best environmental practice, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and a production method in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and processes.”

The land area of Ireland is 6.9 million hectares, of which 4.4m hectares is used for agriculture and 0.73m hectares for forestry. 80% of the agricultural area is devoted to pasture, hay, and grass silage, 12% to rough grazing, and 8% to crops (including cereals and fruit & horticulture production). Of the 4.4m hectares used for agriculture, [72,000 hectares are organic in Ireland](#).

The market value of organic produce from Ireland reached €189m in 2020, achieving growth within the sector of 16.2%. In December 2019, the European Commission published a strategy to create a sustainable economy in Europe. The “[European Green Deal](#)” aims to help Europe become climate neutral continent by 2050. As part of the Green Deal, the [Farm to Fork Strategy](#) and the [EU Biodiversity Strategy](#), both published in May 2020, set out the vision for food systems and ambitious action plans to halt biodiversity loss in Europe. Some of the ambitious targets set out in the Farm to Fork Strategy include:

- A reduction by 50% in the use and risk of chemical pesticides by 2030
- A reduction of at least 50% in nutrient loss while ensuring no deterioration on soil fertility
- A reduction of at least 20% in fertiliser use by 2030
- A reduction by 50% in the sales of antimicrobials for farmed animals and in aquaculture by 2030 an objective to achieve 25% of total farmland under organic farming by 2030

These are European level targets, Ireland and each member state will be expected to contribute to achieving these targets.

Organic Farmers can access a range of services and information from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). In 2018, DAFM established an Organic Sector Strategy Group tasked with developing a strategy for developing the [Organic Food Sector for the period up to 2025](#), coinciding with Food Wise 2025. Food Wise 2025 is the overarching strategy for the Irish food and drink sector to drive value for Irish agricultural produce. The overall objective of the strategy is to further develop a viable Organic Food Sector in Ireland, enhancing the sustainability credentials of Irish food, producing a wide range of organic products to meet domestic and export market opportunities.

Growing awareness regarding the health benefits of organic food consumption has helped drive the sector. The organic sector in Ireland is a small component of the agri-food sector and is experiencing considerable growth; the growing trends for the sector underline the opportunities for increased production of organic food products in Ireland.



The Rural Development Programme (RDP) has encouraged the expansion of land area under organic production, thanks to a suite of supports that have been put in place.

Some €56million had been allocated to the Organic Farming Scheme under the RDP 2014-2020, extended 2022. The [Organic Farming Scheme](#) provided area-based payments to registered organic farmers. The scheme aims to deliver enhanced environmental and animal welfare benefits and encourage producers to respond to the market demand for organically produced food.

Under the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme (TAMS II), the [Organic Capital Investment Scheme](#) provides grant aid of up to 60% for farmers who meet the 'young farmers' criteria and 40% to remaining farmers for investment in structures and equipment.

The NRN met with Eddie Kiernan and his wife Swantje, organic tillage farmers from North County Dublin. Eddie and Swantje are full-time farmers, farming 50 hectares. Crops grown on the farm are a mix of beans, oats, potatoes, and hay.



Photo Source: NRN

Caption: Swantje and Eddie with their dog in a field of cover crops

Eddie and Swantje have built a good reputation locally for producing high-quality organic produce. Oats are sold to Flavahan's, and the beans provide high organic protein content to organic animal feeds, such as meals for organic dairies. Organic hay is supplied to local equine establishments.

In 2001, Eddie began converting his farm from conventional farming to organic farming.

“Learning to work with nature was the biggest challenge we faced. The presence of certain weeds acts as an indicator for soil health. In conventional farming systems spraying crops will suppress the presence of weeds, but within organic farming systems spraying is not an option. Organic systems require additional manual input and management compared to conventional systems.

Different types of weeds provide different information about the soil or field; whether it is poorly drained or the soil may be abundant on lacking in specific nutrients, this information acts as a decision support tool helping farmers decide how to best manage soils, crops, or a particular field in an organic system”.

Eddie and Swantje are active participants in the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS). The OFS is an agri-environmental measure under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. In [2019](#), almost €10.2M was spent under the Organic Farming Scheme, with a total of 1,530 farmers receiving a payment.

Eddie and Swantje are also active participants in the GLAS (Green Low-carbon Agri-environmental Scheme) and the TAMS II (Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme) schemes.

“The GLAS scheme is a good incentive, the rates provided for completion of actions subsidises the cost of implementing the action, there are also added environmental benefits such as rejuvenating the soil and addressing soil fertility by including nitrogen-fixing cover crops on the farm and providing flower and forage areas for wild birds and pollinators.”



Photo Source: NRN

Caption: New hay/straw storage shed built under TAMS II

“The TAMS II scheme is excellent; it allows farmers to invest in buildings or equipment which they may not have been able to afford without grant-aid. Grant-aid means new, safer, and more efficient machinery can be purchased”.

Eddie purchased a new Mulcher, Seeder, Mower and also built a new straw/hay storage facility on his farm under the TAMS II scheme.

‘We see organic farming as a sustainable way of life. As a family, our knowledge of the biodiversity present on the farm is excellent; you become curious about the different plants and flowers growing on the farm and learn to identify them”.

The Kiernan’s also plant 125 native trees annually. This measure encourages local wildlife to visit their farm.

The NRN would like to thank Eddie and Swantje for taking the time out of their busy spring schedule to talk to us about their farm.

Source: NRN

Resources:

www.gov.ie

[Review of Organic Food Sector and Strategy for its Development 2019-2025](#)

[EU Green Deal](#)

[Farm to Fork](#)

[EU Biodiversity Strategy](#)