

Knowledge transfer in organic farming in Estonia

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In Estonia, the land area under organic production has expanded by 2.5 times over the last ten years, and is currently 199,947 ha, representing ca 20% of the total agricultural area in 2017. This percentage makes Estonia one of the three leading countries in the EU for organic agricultural production. In 2017, there were 1888 organic farmers and 165 organic processors in Estonia.

The Estonian University of Life Sciences and some vocational schools offer organic farming courses, but it is not currently possible to obtain a degree or to specialize in organic farming. In addition, a specialised organic farming advisory system does not exist in Estonia. But the demand for new knowledge is very high, and all farmers applying for organic farming support are obliged to participate in training events.

In order to improve the training and knowledge transfer system, the Ministry of Rural Affairs prepared a long-term programme of knowledge transfer in organic farming for the period 2016–2019. The programme, financed from the Rural Development Plan, has been implemented in cooperation with five organisations. All the programme's activities are targeted to each part of the organic food production chain: farmers, processors, caterers and distributors.

Programme activities:

- training days on organic production, processing and marketing,
- demonstration trials, introducing cropping systems, cereal varieties, berry and fruit varieties and their agrotechnologies,

- presentations to organic operators (e.g. milk processing, meat processing),
- yearly organic farming conference,
- study groups (e.g. for cereal growers, beef cattle growers),
- study trips to organic farms in Estonia and abroad,
- information materials (booklets and electronic materials) in plant and animal production, processing, marketing etc.,
- webpage, www.maheklubi.ee, providing information on events, published materials and other practical topics.

During 2016-2017, 146 training days were organised and, on average, 27 people participated each day, there were a total of 3,878 participations (one person could participate in more than one activity). The activities covered all counties in Estonia, and half of them were organised on farms as field days. Methods used were e.g. field visits and practical soil sampling, observations, seminars and discussions. This programme also helps to disseminate the results of research projects, e.g. TILMAN-ORG which studied the effects of green manure cover crops on soil, biodiversity and yield, and FertilCrop investigating the effects of cover crops on soil, weed control and yields. In addition to the new knowledge, all the activities give an opportunity to meet, discuss and share experiences. Common interests and cooperation are an important part of the development of the organic food sector. Experience and knowledge gained will help farmers and processors to produce more organic food and increase their competitiveness in the local and export markets.