

Production and Marketing of Organic Ornamentals

Developments in Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany

Organic Ornamental Plants: Their first appearance in Public

Publication of a study on organic ornamental plants (Billmann, 1996) commissioned by the Swiss Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) was the incentive for the first Organic Flower Meeting, which was financially supported by the World Wildlife Foundation Switzerland and the supermarket chain COOP Switzerland.

This investigation showed that organic cultivation of cut flowers and ornamental plants was difficult because of the lack of information and experience. But it was possible and it was done! At that time, production was based on the EU's general organic standards or the standards set by organic farmers' and vegetable growers' associations.

There were no specific guidelines on organic ornamental plants, hardly any advice available, and no training courses offered for growers. Nor were there specialised growers' associations. Only GEA, founded in the Netherlands 1993 as a subsidiary of the flower auction in Aalsmeer, tried to improve the production and marketing of organic ornamental plants by further education of growers and a special marketing concept.

Marketing proved far more difficult than the production of organic flowers. Despite an increasing awareness of environmental and social issues, consumers had little knowledge of the problems that conventional flower production creates, both in Europe and in "Third World" countries.

Development of Production in Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany

Since 1996, the number of growers raising ornamental plants organically has almost doubled in all these countries. Positive steps also were taken to improve the self-organisation of the growers and the marketing of their products (Table 1).

In Switzerland, the first organic ornamental standards were published early in 1996. In autumn 1996 the Swiss VBPG (Vereinigung biologisch produzierender Gartenbaubetriebe – the Association of growers of Organic Ornamentals) was founded. Fifty growers meet regularly to exchange knowledge and experience.

Also and expert board on organic floriculture was established as a division of BIO SUISSE (VSBLO), the main Swiss organisation for organic agriculture. The board consists of producers, specialized dealers, wholesale distributors, an environmental/ consumers' association and advisors from FiBL. The board meets two to three times a year to discuss standards, marketing and suitable assortments of plants (Der Gartenbau, 1998).

In the NETHERLANDS, a new period started in the beginning of 1997. Although the marketing-organisation GEA went out of existence on December 31., 1996, only a few days later a public advisor especially for organic floriculture was put in charge. Among other activities, she organised a research group, a study group for organic floriculture with about 70 growers, and an institution of experts in production, marketing and advising, comparable to the board of experts in Switzerland.

Relying on self-organisation, producers who formerly were connected to GEA are now selling some of their plants to the private wholesaler called De Schoof. Another outlet is the flower auction Vleuten, run by the trading organisation Biosfeer.

In Germany, mainly the growers' associations Bioland and Naturland took charge of organic ornamentals. Both organisations elaborated and published their floriculture standards, similar to those in Switzerland, just in time to the first seminary on organic ornamentals in Germany in September 1996.

In the beginning of 1997, the main organisation on German organic agriculture, AGÖL, published a list of more than 100 growers of organic ornamentals. But whilst there was the Bio Suisse expert board in Switzerland and the Biosfeer marketing organisation in the Netherlands, there are no comparable institutions on higher levels in Germany. Moreover there is no specialized counselling. That is why in Germany there is little exchange between producers and trade-organisations.

Table 1. Comparative overview of the development of organic ornamental plant organisations in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Germany

	Switzerland	Netherlands	Germany
Producers	50	70	100
Grower Associations	<i>Vereinigung biologisch produzierender Gartenbaubetriebe (VBPG)</i>	Study Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bioland Pflanzenkontor</i> • <i>AGÖB</i> • 2 Study Groups
Advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 part-time advisors at the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (<i>FiBL</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 advisor at the public counselling organisation <i>DLV</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 part-time advisors at <i>Bioland</i> and <i>Naturland</i> • 1 public part-time advisor in Hessen
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • training courses preparing conversion • different grower meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different training courses organised by <i>DLV</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • annual training course organised by <i>Bioland</i> and <i>Naturland</i> • grower meetings
Connection between production, trade and advising	<i>Bio Suisse</i> expert board	Foundation 'Organic Ornamental Plants'	---
Connection between production, research and advising	<i>FiBL</i>	Research group	---
Publications	internal letter by <i>VBPG</i>	internal letter by <i>DLV</i>	internal letter for growers of organic vegetables and ornamental plants in Hessen

Some exceptions should be mentioned:

- BIOLAND PFLANZENKONTOR, a producer co-operative founded in 1996 by eight organic nurseries in northern Germany, all specialized in growing herbs, herbaceous plants, trees and shrubs.
- AGÖB (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ökologische Baumschulen), a group of some 20 organic tree nurseries, founded in 1997.
- Two study groups on organic cut flowers and pot and bedding plants in the Frankfurt and Munich areas, each with some 20 members.

Consumer Acceptance of Organic Flowers and Plants in Switzerland and Germany

In March 1996, in the eastern part of Switzerland, a pilot project investigated the market for organically grown flowers and herbs (Wüthrich et al., 1996). More than 100 consumers were given a choice between plants of organic and conventional origin. The investigation showed that consumers of organic food preferred to buy organic ornamental plants, within a certain price limit. However, all consumer groups highly esteemed the plants' appearance at the point of sale and their longevity, both of which were more important criteria than the price.

The customers' level of information about production methods proved to be very low. To most, 'organic' simply meant 'raised without chemicals'. That was almost all they knew about organic production. Most customers asked for more information about the plants' origin (labelling, leaflets).

Meanwhile the flower-department of the supermarket chain COOP, as well as some garden centres and flower shops, successfully started selling organic ornamentals.

Nevertheless, it has been proven that there is a demand for organic cut flowers and ornamentals. Evidence of this was given by different investigations in Germany. One was conducted in summer 1997 and 1998 by Hamburg Technical College at some markets in Hamburg offering organic products, but with only one stall offers organic cut flowers (Labrenz, 1997; 1998). In 1997 500 interviews were done at nine organic markets; in 1998, 1000 interviews at 10 conventional markets, with the same questions.

The major results were as follows:

- 54% of the buyers at the organic markets and 49% of those at conventional markets supported the idea of organic flowers.
- 87% and 65%, respectively, could imagine buying organic flowers.
- 49% and 20%, respectively, would theoretically pay 15% above the conventional prices for organic flowers.
- 30% and 58%, respectively, regularly buy flowers at weekly markets.

The most important characteristics when buying flowers were freshness (for conventional buyers) and appearance (for organic buyers). Of medium importance were: absence of residues, origin (organic buyers only), and floristic aspects (conventional buyers).

The results show the importance of quality, which was more important than residues or origin. The conclusion is that there still are potential buyers of organic plants and flowers, if they are very well informed about organic and the conventional production methods.

Marketing Prospects for Organic Ornamentals

With the current unemployment situation and general economic conditions, environmental issues tend to be falling behind in consumers' thinking. Thus, in the near future we can expect only a slight growth of acceptance of organic ornamentals. Also, prices will not increase greatly. The long-term prognosis talks about a 2-4 % market share, with even higher figures being expected in the top regions and top customer groups. With those goals not yet reached, there is scope for convinced professional growers to establish themselves in a new market.

So far success has been made by combining cut flowers and ornamentals with edible plants like herbs or small vegetable plants. A central sales area with easily recognisable information is an important feature of successful selling. A good selection attracts consumers' interest.

Small scale joint ventures for selling, exchanging and replenishing plants are recommended. The growers' co-operative Bioland Pflanzenkontor, mentioned earlier, has published a mail order catalogue and successfully deals in a combination of seven nurseries' stocks.

Experience so far has led to the following suggestions:

- Quality should always have priority over quantity; consciously work your way towards premium products.
- Know thy customer!! Know thy market!! Before production starts, good knowledge should be obtained of both, customer structure and marketing opportunities. Clear decisions should be made that concentrate on a few outlets.
- If wholesale is appropriate, co-operation with customers should start well in advance and continue.
- Co-operation with organic growers has proven to be very important. Hints and tips on growing and selling are essential for everyone. Moral support can sometimes be vital, and certainly during times of conversion.
- Well-educated employees are responsible for a good education of your customers. The commonsense reason for organic ornamentals has to be conveyed by labelling, leaflets, posters, open days, seminars - by both the written and the spoken word.
- Floriculture in the fullest sense of the word has to be founded on a bouquet bound of art, sensuality and sensitivity to Nature.

Outlook

For the further growth of organic ornamentals, the following conclusions may prove correct:

- Sustainability of economic activities is required not just by experts but also by consumers. That's why integrated and organic production will be the main form of floriculture.
- The term 'good quality' in the future will refer not just to the outward appearance and longevity of the plants, but also to good working conditions and ecologically satisfactory methods of production.
- With organic ornamentals, consumers are buying a piece of an 'intact world'. That is why many of them are willing to pay higher prices, if the reasons are explained completely. Therefore, not just production but also trade as well must be transparent and ethically correct.

It is evident that this course of development requires a great deal of work. Nevertheless, not just the organic but also conventional floriculture will benefit by the actions required in research and advising.

It will take several years of work in explaining and organising production and marketing before organic ornamentals occupy their proper place.

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