

The world's first and newest organic magazines are Australian

After years of published claims that the organic agriculture movement in Australia dates from the 1980s, it will surprise most to learn that Australia was in fact an early adopter and indeed a world pioneer in sustainable agriculture and organic magazine publishing writes **John Paull**.

Founded in Sydney in October 1944, the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society (AOFGS) has long been forgotten, but it can make some interesting claims to fame. It seems it was the first farming association in the world to adopt the then new concept 'organic' into its title.

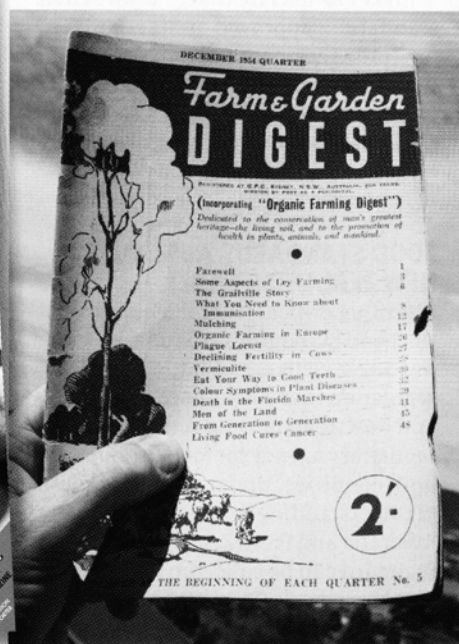
The AOFGS can also claim to be the first association to have created a statement of 'organic' principles. The society published a 10-point proclamation of principles, which were particularised for local Australian conditions. And those practices, which were advocated more than half a century ago, still make for compelling reading and laudable agricultural and gardening practice.

And, the *Organic Farming Digest*, the journal of the AOFGS, appears to be the first 'organic' agriculture journal in the world published by an association.

ORIGIN OF THE TERM 'ORGANIC FARMING'

World War II, Australia, would seem like a most unlikely time and place to find

"The term 'Organic Farming' was first introduced in 1940 by Lord Northbourne in his book *Look to the Land*"



the world's organic farming pioneers. The term 'organic farming' was at the time very new; it had been introduced by Lord Northbourne in his book *Look to the Land*, which was published in London, 1940. Northbourne's manifesto of organic farming clearly delineated the territory as a clash of cultures: 'organic versus chemical farming'.

Britain, 1940, was a challenging place to float a new idea for food and farming. Organic farming was competing for attention with the most urgent matters of national, and personal, survival, with reports of the fall of France, military clashes, death, destruction and mayhem, German POWs, and the news of the arrival of the first Anzacs to the UK. And there was no UK Soil Association; that organisation was not established until after the war in 1946.

Under the prevailing political arrangements of the day, Britain at war meant Australia at war. Yet war clearly did not stifle the spread of fresh ideas. New ideas can travel fast, and the urgency of wartime may even increase their velocity.

THEN CAME NAASA AND BFA

As late as the 1980's alternative farmers

in Australia were toying with various terms other than 'organic' for their 'alternativeness', and yet the founders of the AOFGS 'got it' as early as 1944. In the mid-1980s, when Australia's two currently dominant organic certifiers, NAASA and BFA, were founded, neither chose 'organic'; NAASA chose 'sustainable' and the BFA chose 'biological' to characterise their points of difference from chemical agriculture.

The AOFGS was founded in a nation that had been at war since 1939 and in which, by 1944, the economy was seconded for a massive war effort. Many personal and business consumables were either unavailable or rationed, or both. Paper was in short supply and although a limited number of children's books, for example, were published that year in Australia, albeit on recycled newspaper-quality stock, there was no paper stock for a new organic farming publication.

EARLY MAGAZINE PUBLISHING

Despite the privations of WWII and its aftermath, the AOFGS published the first issue of their journal *Organic Farming Digest* in April 1946. It was a publication of 32 pages and 12 articles (*about the*

size of *The Organic Way* edition you are reading now - Editor). The war had meant a publication delay of eighteen months since the founding of the society, but a mere six months after the capitulation of Japan, and thus the outbreak of peace, the *Organic Farming Digest* appeared.

The AOFGS published *Organic Farming Digest*, later rebadged as *Farm & Garden Digest* (Incorporating the *Organic Farming Digest*), from April 1946 to December 1954. Spanning nearly a decade of publishing, there were 29 issues and 378 articles. Nearly half the articles were Australian and most others were sourced from the UK and the USA, with a sprinkling of articles from South Africa, New Zealand and continental Europe.

SIMILAR EDITORIAL TOPICS TO TODAY

Organic farming articles in the post-war decade dealt with issues that retain their currency today. Topics included practical farming matters: 'Shelter Belts to Save the Soil'; health: 'Is our Health Related to the Soil?'; environment: 'Poison Sprays Destroy Bees'; and animal welfare: 'Cruelty to Cow and Calf'. More than a decade before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the AOFGS was concerned with persistent pesticides: 'DDT in Our Daily Diet'. And Monsanto's latest technowonder solution for farmers was decried: 'Krilium Condemned'.

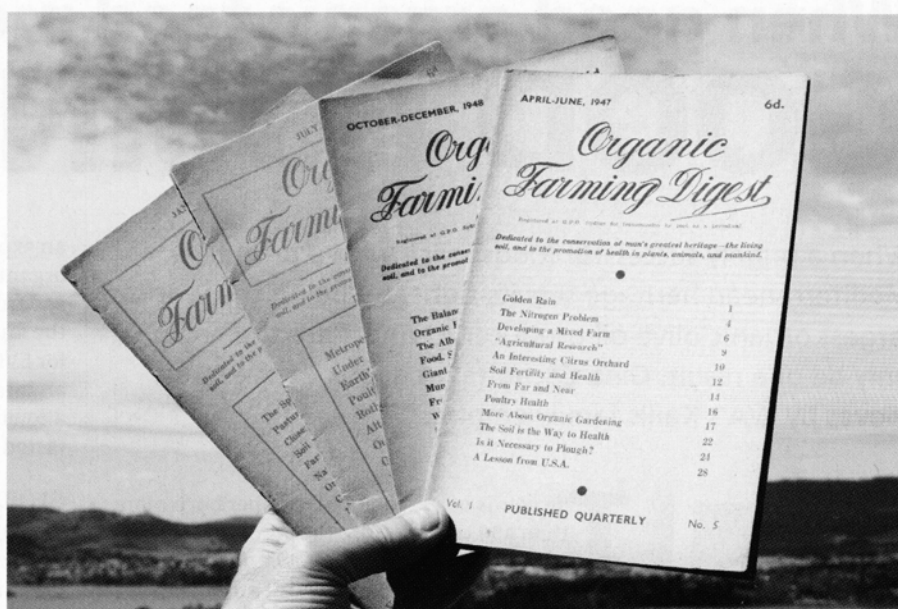
The Antipodean enunciation of 10 principles was the earliest of institutional statements of 'organic' farming principles, and it has retained its vibrancy across the decades.

The AOFGS decried the practice of monocultures, 'the denuding of forests' and 'the pollution of rivers and streams' (Principle 1).

The society declared that it 'advocates organic methods of agriculture' and 'mixed farming in place of monoculture' (Principle 3).

The AOFGS 'condemns the use of poisonous sprays and dusts as such preparations injure the soil by killing its micro-organisms, also the earthworms, bees and birds that are in the vicinity. In place of these poisonous preparations, the Society advocates enriching the soil with compost, thereby providing plants and trees with their natural vitality to resist infestation' (Principle 6). Many decades later French agronomist Francis Chaboussou put the science to this idea and termed it trophobiosis theory.

In their Principle 2 the AOFGS



expressed their concern for practices that upset 'the balance of Nature' and they identified that 'palliation by medicaments, which attempt to cope with effects rather than causes' was not a long-term solution.

The society advocated the 'law of return', the 'returning to the soil of all organic "wastes"' (Principle 4). They advocated against incineration and against 'ocean discharge of sewage'.

The society called for the adoption of a 'precautionary' approach to land management 'in this semi-arid land' (Principle 7). They urged 'large scale tree-planting' (Principle 8) and stated that 'water conservation is of vital importance', but that schemes for impounding water should not be viewed solely as engineering operations' (Principle 10).

THE REAL HISTORY OF ORGANICS IN AUSTRALIA

So, the real history and the first promotion of 'organic farming' in Australia date from four decades earlier than many popular accounts. The *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* existed from 1944 to 1955, and it published an organic journal starting in April 1946 and finishing in December 1954. The *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* wound up in January 1955 due to lack of finances, but the farewell statement in the final journal expressed consolation that the society 'has performed a service in

publicising organic farming principles in Australia.'

Since that seminal time for organics, the idea of organic farming has colonised the world and organic agriculture statistics are now reported annually from 138 countries.

Although nearly lost and forgotten, Australia's organic pioneers, including KH Cox as President, HW Atkinson as Treasurer, EW Jeremy as Secretary, VH Kelly as inaugural Editor, grazier and organics advocate Colonel HF White, and Professor Stanton Hicks of Adelaide University, together with many others, set a ball rolling that today is reportedly a A\$500 million industry for Australia and a A\$50 billion enterprise for the world.

The *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* was far ahead of its time. At the time it was founded, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was yet 18 years away, an international organic organisation was 28 years distant and Chernobyl was still 42 years into the future. ●

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Further Information

Paull, John, (2008), *The Lost History of Organic Farming in Australia*, *Journal of Organic Systems*, 3(2): 2-17, <orgprints.org/15089>.