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Whittlesea

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**Agribusiness**

CASE STUDY:

# Somerset Heritage Produce

As part of the Regenerative Agriculture project undertaken in conjunction with Deakin University, five best practice case studies were developed based on interviews with regenerative agriculture practitioners.





## Background

Somerset Heritage Produce is a small scale, organic market garden based in Seymour Victoria. Located on the banks of the Goulburn River on the grounds of the Somerset Winery, the garden has been established for over 10 years.

Originally wholesaling produce, the market garden began early on shortening its supply chains to maximize return from the small acreage under cultivation. Primary markets now include over 40 local and Melbourne restaurants, as well as seven farmers' markets each month. A new marketing avenue has recently been established using the Open Food Network which allows households to order vegetable boxes directly from the garden for delivery or pick up.

Chloe Fox, the owner of Somerset Heritage Produce, is a 32-year-old fifth generation farmer. Originally from a dairy share farming family in New Zealand, Chloe participated in the Farmer Incubator Pop-up Garlic program in 2016. She then started working with the original proprietor of Somerset Heritage Produce, Robbie.

Chloe trained with Robbie for 2 years on the Somerset Heritage Produce garden and learned all aspects of the market garden business. Around three years ago, Chloe took over the farm and business. She is working hard to grow the business even further through putting her own mark on the garden and its marketing.

# Fast Facts

## Owner / Business:

Chloe Fox  
Somerset Heritage Produce

## Key Farm Outputs:

Variety of seasonal market vegetables

## Age:

33 years

## Generation:

5th generation

## Location:

Seymour, Goulburn Region, Victoria

## Size of farm:

4ha leasehold

## Established:

2009

## Employment:

Two people full time, 5 people part time (total 4.5 FTE)

## Rainfall:

470mm

## Soil Type:

Goulburn River Flats, alluvial silty loam

## Land Tenure:

Leasehold

## Key Markets:

Direct sales to restaurants, farmers markets, Open Food Network



## Need for change



*“The garden has always been organic and has had a focus towards sustainability, but we are now consciously transitioning towards more regenerative practice wherever we can. Without a framework to know exactly what is ‘regenerative’, it feels presumptuous to label ourselves as such, but we are learning and improving our practices all the time with this ambition in mind. We have been working hard on taking things a little slower in the garden.”*

*“We have been putting effort into building soil health, encouraging diversity through increasing the range of crops we produce and looking for natural opportunities to increase biodiversity, including practices like windrowing, leaving crops to go to seed as food sources for wildlife and encouraging natural predators for parasite control.”*

# Innovative approach

*“Being an ethical enterprise is at the core of our business. It is important to our customers too, so we tell that story and explain how the farm operates as a part of our marketing. It goes beyond simply being organic and is a part of everything we do on the farm. Employees are paid and treated well. We reduce packaging and wastage through staff training, targeted growing to market requirements and good growing practice, such as trellising to reduce blemishes. If an excess is produced, it goes to Fair Share. As long as the business remains profitable, it doesn’t necessarily matter if excess doesn’t get sold, but at least it gets eaten!”*

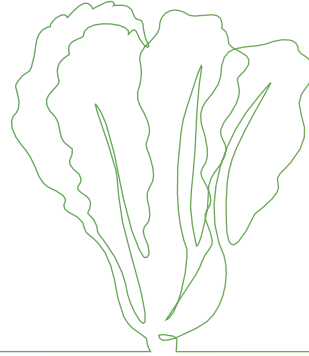


# Certification

The Somerset Heritage Produce garden is not certified organic with any official certification program. Instead, there is close connection between the consumer and the grower which gives the business transparency of its production methods. This allows those purchasing the produce to understand directly from Chloe and the other garden employees exactly what the growing methods are and what the ethos of the business is. The garden is also open to the public by appointment and holds occasional events to foster a greater understanding of how the farm works and further develop this transparency.



# Operational Information



## Local Government Authority:

Mitchell Shire

## Planning Controls:

Urban Floodway Zone (UFZ); Environmental Significance Overlay (ESO3); Floodway Overlay (FO); Heritage Overlay (HO154).

## Percentage of land utilized:

75 percent

## Percentage of land for biodiversity:

25 percent

## Proportion of income:

100 percent

## Pasture base:

N/A

## Marketing approach:

Cafés, restaurants, farmers markets, Open Food Network

## Volunteer use:

Occasionally volunteers from World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOFers).

## Open to public:

Open to the customers by appointment.

## Farming framework:

Biointensive Horticulture; Regenerative agriculture practitioner; Biodiversity conservation.

## Certification (eg. Organic):

N/A

## Transitioned (year):

2010

## Other products (household):

Eggs, honey

# Question and Answer

**Q.** What benefits have you found in a regenerative approach to farming?

**A.** *Diversity of bird life, higher worm population, less problematic insect infestations and soil health improvements. More time into soil preparation for greater long-term productivity. Increase in productivity in certain crops and less wastage due to less pest impact.*

**Q.** What have been your biggest farming challenges?

**A.** *Having the resilience to constantly adapt to seasonal challenges and market challenges. Being able to bounce back from everything that goes wrong. I'm not able to distil it into a specific event, but – everything goes wrong and there will always be a new disaster to deal with. Fix it, learn from it, bounce back and keep going.*

**Q.** What has been your biggest farming achievement?

**A.** *Sustained employment for people and creating a team. It's a real job, not something just back packers do. We do a disservice to the industry when we treat agriculture as something only for foreign workers or people not being paid fairly. If we can't pay enough for food to create fair employment for local people, it's not a sustainable industry. I feel very lucky to have the people around me that I do and am very proud of the team.*

**Q.** What are the biggest industry challenges faced by yourself and other producers?

**A.** *Sustainable employment in the industry and making food valuable enough that people are willing to pay a fair price for it without costing people or the environment in unmeasured costs.*

**Q.** What have been your biggest business challenges?

**A.** *Having people understand what a fair price for food is and what goes into food production. There is a perception that farmers markets or buying direct is more expensive when costs are often not any higher than supermarkets. The supermarkets often don't pay a fair price to the farmers resulting in unfair work conditions and unnecessary impacts on the environment to reduce the cost of production. In contrast, this garden offers fair employment, better environmental outcomes and a better food system. We need to decide how we wish to survive or thrive as a community.*

**Q.** What has been your biggest business achievement?

**A.** *Surviving thus far. Every time a crop is grown successfully, sold and is eaten, that is an achievement!*

**Q.** Who have been your mentors?

**A.** *The organic farming community is a very sharing and welcoming community. There are no trade secrets, and everyone is very supportive.*

*Robbie, who established Somerset.*

*Robin and Peter at Transition Farm in the Mornington Peninsula ([www.transitionfarm.com](http://www.transitionfarm.com))*

*Nadia Dante at Fat Pig Farm (<https://fatpig.farm/>)*

*Old Mill Rd garden (<https://oldmillroad.com.au/>)*





**Q.** What have been your most influential texts?

**A.** Podcasts are now more important. No time to read as too busy farming!

*Farmer to farmer podcast by Chris Blanchard (<https://www.farmertofarmerpodcast.com/episodes>) Farmer interviews with a huge amount of information.*

**Q.** What action could local government take to support regenerative agriculture?

**A.** Food hubs and co-ops – farmers don't have the time to develop these assets but would be able to utilize them as outlets to the community. If someone could take on the administrative and legal burden while using some of the unused local buildings, that would really help the industry connect with community.

**Q.** What action could state government take to support regenerative agriculture?

**A.** Grants. Looking at the representation of agriculture. Focus of state government is large scale, monocultural farmers growing for export market rather than the small scale, community focused food production. This is a problem of the whole food system.

*Interest free loans for farmers and investment into these small-scale projects will help them establish and thrive.*

**Q.** What actions have you taken to increase your climate resilience?

**A.** Working towards the regenerative practice ideal has also supported the climate resilience of the farm. Last summer was really hard, so we focused on keeping water in the ground and making irrigation as efficient as possible. Keeping all ground under cover is essential to this – no bare earth!

*We are increasing biointensive practices on the farm, so we produce more produce from less water and space. Climate resilience is not the result of a specific action but is considered as a part of all management decisions.*

*We are looking towards energy consumption and action to reduce impact such as transitioning to solar, but not quite there economically as yet. The garden is so subject and vulnerable to climate that it is a part of all decisions – what crops are adaptable to the conditions and water availability.*

**Q.** Why do you do what you do?

**A.** Cos I like it. I love the lifestyle. I like working outside with birds and bees and constantly changing food and landscape and day to day work. It's pretty good and prettier than an office – and the food is good.

**Q.** What are your plans for the future?

**A.** Keep learning and keep trying to do it better and better. I don't want to take over a bigger farm, I just want to do this, better.

*The idea of owning land sounds great but I am wary of the investment required. Debt can affect everything you do. My family background is in share milking rather than owning land. I am comfortable on leased land.*



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## What is Biointensive Agriculture?

The “GROW BIOINTENSIVE® Sustainable Mini-Farming method” was developed by John Jeavons during the 1970’s. Jeavons is the Executive Director of the non-profit Ecology Action, based in Willits, California. He was a political science student from Yale and worked in the United States Agency for International Development and Stanford University before developing the farming approach. The system claims to “increase yields, build fertile soil up to 60 times faster than nature, and use 66% less water per pound of food, compared with conventional practices.”

The Biointensive method draws on historical intensive farming systems used around the world, including those used in China, Greece and Latin America, but with a particular focus on the techniques of biodynamics, a European approach developed in the 1920’s by Rudolf Steiner, and the French Intensive Gardening methods of the 1700 and 1800’s.

Jeavons believes that each person has the capacity to make a profound difference in the sustainability of our agriculture and through it, our world; and that if we each learn to take care of our part of the Earth – our garden – then we can change our situation from one of scarcity to abundance: of enough for everyone

### Useful Links

<https://johnjeavons.org/about/>  
<http://www.roebuckfarm.com/what-is-biointensive-gardening.html>  
<https://www.urbanagriculture.org.au/information/gardening/biointensive-gardening/>  
[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J064v19n02\\_07](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J064v19n02_07)

We would like to acknowledge that the information contained within this case study is the intellectual property of Somerset Heritage Produce.

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