

Zucchini farmer no stranger to change

Paul Le Feuvre

You probably do it in your backyard and even some cafes and restaurants do it. Peter Cundall does it. Composting - that dark, friable stuff that once started out as scraps and rubbish is the king of conditioners for soil.

“When I first started growing vegetables I was spraying them a lot and thought: ‘this is going to kill me and I don’t know about the poor beggar that’s going to have to eat it’. I thought there’s got to be a better way. People got by without these chemicals for many years before they came along. Maybe we’re going to have to get by without them again.”



Paul Le Feuvre grows 100 hectares of zucchinis and hundreds of mangoes in Giru, south of Townsville. He is a passionate farmer. He is not scared of challenges and is committed to doing the best he can do by the environment as long as he makes money. He has been doing his best to eliminate chemicals during the 21 years he has been farming. Now he is going to make tonnes and tonnes of his own compost to improve soil structure and replace fertilisers.

The Le Feuvres spent \$80,000 on a large machine that makes compost. It turns raw materials in long windrows two metres wide and 1.5 metres high, mixing them and spraying them with water to ensure they’ve got 40 per cent moisture. At the end of the process it even makes compost tea or liquid. Chicken manure, sorghum, hay and clay will go in the mix to make compost.

The clay is an important part of the process because microbes need to attach to something. Making the compost will follow a strict temperature curve. The aim is for the rows to heat to 65 degrees - and if it doesn’t get there start over again. The whole process from go to woe will take six to eight weeks. Paul emphasises that successful compost making is all about particle management - every piece of ingredient has to be exposed to every other ingredient. “You’ve got to get the microbes to dissect everything, pull it apart and then build it all back up again to make humus.”

Once it is done they’ll spread it on the ground and water it in. The Le Feuvres have put their trust into machinery developed overseas and a process dictated by a compost specialist in the United States. Paul says, “The guy that we’re learning it from is the only guy I know who can claim that they can lift soil organic matter very quickly.” Some farmers import compost to use on their farms but the Le Feuvres hope to get better quality control by doing it themselves.

“There are lots of gurus out there and I’ve listened to most of them. A lot of these fellows use inoculants of different sorts – you could call it snake oil – some are and some aren’t. It’s hard to know if you’re dealing with something that works or not. But with this stuff I make the product myself. I know what it is. It’s got a good reputation.” Paul said.

This is not the first time Paul has tried something different and he is not too proud to admit he has fallen on his face a few times and lost a lot of money. In the process of trying new things the Le Feuvres have damaged fruit and lost thousands of dollars worth of mangoes. He and his brother Peter are aiming for healthier soils, healthier food and to use less fuel, cardboard, plastic, chemicals and fertilisers. Paul feels they’re not bold enough to become organic because he will have less to rely on if they need to get themselves out of trouble if need be.

The financial pain of funding the compost maker was reduced somewhat because the Le Feuvres received funding through the Australian Government’s Reef Rescue initiative in conjunction with their local natural resource management group NQ Dry Tropics. Queensland horticulture industry group Growcom helped the Le Feuvres do a farm management plan in preparation for the funding.

NQ Dry Tropics’ Brett King says the funding application he got from the Le Feuvres was different. “We got 30 applications from growers in our region for Reef Rescue funding and we funded Paul’s because it’s innovative and is an initiative that could be seen as best practice in future.

“From our perspective the most important thing is that Paul has thought about their whole farming system. They’ve looked at their farm inputs and they’ve thought that they can use Reef Rescue in terms of how it can improve water quality and also benefit their production and profitability. It’s got measurable water quality improvements that fitted in with the farm management system plan.”

You might wonder how these farmers have the confidence to try new things and afford changes. Paul thinks he can in the horticulture game because the big inputs are in other things like labour, boxes and freight. The larger cash turn over in horticulture also gives him room to think outside the square.

The compost idea is theory based on workshops and reading. Paul laughs when he says he is “naively confident” that it will work. They’ve just started making the compost and we look forward to an update in future.

“I once bragged about how much we were doing to reduce our fertiliser usage but at the end of the year I added it all up and realised I’d wasted a lot of nitrogen. I probably ticked all the boxes that year in terms of soil and leaf testing but still lost lots of nitrogen. Even when you are very careful with fertilizer use, how much have you really reduced your impact? I don’t know.”

He thinks most of the nitrogen could be ending up in the water table but wonders how you measure it. “We put on around 100 to 200 kilos per hectare per year of nitrogen on the zucchinis, almost none on mangoes.”

They’ve improved soil organic matter, reduced the use of soluble fertilisers and stopped using hard insecticides and fungicides. They only cultivate the soil one year in four and they’ve introduced insects to control pest problems. The Le Feuvres market their fruit and vegetables directly. They don’t leverage off the biological approach they take although they use far less chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Their zucchinis and mangoes are sold as conventional and he disputes that it might cost more to produce fruit and vegetables this way. “I think it costs less. I’m a lazy sod. Some people do recreational ploughing etc. We don’t. We use the same trickle tape for four years, we don’t dig it up. “I reckon if we [farmers] stopped digging up our dirt straight away, we’d make the biggest impact we could ever make for soil organic matter, soil health and fertiliser use.”

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