

CAMBRIDGE ORGANIC GAZETTE

courgette



The Dirt on Soil

A look at the earth beneath our feet

Six Inches of Soil

The new docu-film being made by
Cambridgeshire production team

Waterland Organics

Farming in the Fens

Seasonal Shakshuka

Recipe for this seasons greens

Grow Your Soil

How to keep your soil at home happy

Comment from Duncan:

Founder and owner of Cambridge Organic.

Few things excite us more, here at Cambridge Organic, than when a new organic grower starts up in our local area. The thing is, this happens with about the same frequency as a royal jubilee, so we were utterly delighted when we found out about Adrienne, who has

recently started a market garden in Caxton called Sweetpea Market Garden. We can't put Sweetpea Market Garden produce into our veg boxes just yet because Adrienne is still in the process of converting the land to organic, however, we think it's important to support local growers through the transition period, so we will be supplying her produce to local shops through the Food Hub local distribution system.

The excitement surrounding Adrienne doesn't end with her peashoots either; Adrienne is a star of a new documentary film on regenerative farming, currently in production, called 'Six Inches of Soil'. Many of the team behind the Six Inches of Soil project are based here in Cambridge, and the film's producer, Claire is even a member of our organic box scheme. We spoke to Claire about the story behind the film.

Soil is also an important theme in our profile on Waterland Organics. A beloved long time grower for Cambridge Organic.



Loathed as I am to bring up the subject, I do have to talk about inflation and the cost of living crisis, and although we've tried to resist putting up the prices of our veg

boxes for as long as possible it was inevitable we'd have to do so at some point. Clearly this is something we've considered at length, and we were somewhat gladdened to find out that we had enough wiggle room to put our prices up and still be less expensive than the big national

box schemes. We will communicate these changes more fully over the coming months.

Distributing locally, and in what is an almost fully electric fleet of vans, means that we have been less affected by the increase in fuel costs. Clearly there are all sorts of factors other than fuel cost that affect food prices, but all the same, we are only just beginning to experience the kind of economic disruption that will inevitably arise as the climate emergency intensifies and the importance of resilient, local food systems ought to be clear. This is a significant aspect of the 'Local Food

Ecosystem' concept and everything we are aiming to achieve with the Food Hub project.



Seasonal greens shakshuka



This wonderfully flavoured and super healthy North African dish has been adapted to use green seasonal veg. Here we are using local asparagus, spinach and broad beans as our seasonal heroes with delicious eggs from Laura's Organic. For a vegan alternative to eggs you could try cubed tofu, vegan sausages, falafel balls or chickpeas.

Ingredients

- 12 asparagus tips
- 100g peas
- 100g broad beans
- 200g spinach, shredded
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- Knob of butter
- 1 large leek, sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, sliced
- 2 tsp cumin seeds
- 4-6 eggs
- a handful dill, chopped
- a pinch chilli flakes, (optional)

STEP 1 - Blanch the asparagus in a pan of boiling salted water for 30 seconds. Add the peas and beans and cook for another 30 seconds, then add in the spinach for 2 seconds more. Tip everything out into a colander to drain.

STEP 2 - Heat the olive oil and butter in a large frying pan. Cook the leeks and garlic until soft, then add the cumin seeds. Stir in the blanched veg and cook for 3-4 minutes. Season, then make holes for as many eggs as you want and crack an egg into each space.

STEP 3 - Keep cooking gently on the hob until the eggs are done how you like them (cover with a lid if you want to speed things up). Scatter over dill and chilli flakes and add another drizzle of olive oil before serving.



Six Inches of Soil



Claire Mackenzie talks soil with Alice Guillaume

'Six Inches of Soil' is a documentary feature film on regenerative farming, currently being filmed nationwide, driven by a Cambridge-based team. We met up with producer Claire Mackenzie on location at 'Sweetpea Market Garden' near Caxton to talk about the film's inspiration and aims.

Claire is a passionate environmentalist who moved to Cambridgeshire seven years ago and was strongly affected by the intensive farming practices she saw. Cambridge is located in the heart of the most agriculturally productive region of the UK and the arable land here feeds a lot of Britain.

"It's not just what is happening on the land but what is happening to the whole system."

When community-based lobbying organisation Carbon Neutral Cambridge asked Claire to join during the pandemic she readily agreed and focused her attention on exploring agriculture in the region. Inspired by such films as 'Big Little Farm' and with funding from South Cambridgeshire and other local funding groups, Claire, along with director Colin Ramsay, created "From the Ground Up".

This 40-minute film focuses on farms from the Cambridgeshire region. As Claire explains, it 'explores the idea that conventional farmers who were taking the big leap to organic were going on this regenerative journey; looking at their soils that were being over-farmed and becoming tired and lifeless'. The film received overwhelming interest and helped steer some local farmers to adopt new practices on their land. Driven by this response, the idea for 'Six Inches of Soil' was born.

US films such as 'Kiss the Ground' have proven popular and influential. 'Six Inches of Soil' approaches the discussion of our food system and farming practices through a specifically British lens, as each country faces its own unique challenges. It seems many of us have become disconnected from our food. We are not aware of who grows it, or where it comes from. If it is organic, we have assurances about how it has been grown, but if not, we have no way of knowing what practices have gone into its production. Claire explains how the UK food system is mostly characterised by a few large corporations, homogenous farming practices and monocropping.

The inspiring story of British farmers standing up against the industrial food system and transforming the way they produce food - to heal the soil, benefit our health and provide for local communities.
www.sixinchesofsoil.org

The farmers featured in the film follow a very different approach to agriculture, seeking diversity in the crops they produce. They work to protect the soil. They find alternatives to practices such as ploughing and tilling and are working with innovative practices, such as using animals to help maintain the land, which in fact often have deep roots in the past.

Adrienne Gordon is the farmer behind Sweetpea Market Garden where we meet and she's one of the characters being followed in the film. Her new market garden currently has a flock of sheep 'mowing' the cover crops. Jacob du Toit is a local shepherd. He owns a 1,500 strong herd which he moves around Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire helping to maintain various patches of land.

Claire explains how regenerative farming goes further than the health of the land itself: 'A proper regenerative system, as we would describe it in agroecology, is a localised system, we think about food security, we think about how much we are growing for our local communities and we think about the people on those farms. It's not just what is happening on the land but what is happening to the whole system'.

With such a complex subject matter, Colin acknowledges the importance of keeping the film grounded, of always bringing the focus back to the soil and to the human stories of those who work with it: 'We are not short of characters, experts or content. The main challenge is making sense of it all, making it coherent. It's not just about farming per se, it's about policy, history, relationship with nature, supply chains, supermarkets, corporate power, globalisation, commodity markets: it's everything.'

In addition to playing at film festivals and hopefully on streaming sites, they hope the film will be used to educate and drive discussions within educational settings, and with relevant interest and lobbying groups. The content of the film relates to us all, and not just in the way it relates to our food system. Whether it's in our gardens, allotments, or community spaces, we can all help to heal the soil that supports us. 'Six Inches of Soil' aims not to preach to us, but to simply open our eyes to current British farming practices and to ask us the question - in what direction do we want to see our food system going?



Waterland



**"You walk the roof of the world here.
Only the clouds are higher...
Houses and farms cling like crustations
To the black hull of the earth"**
Author, Edward Storey

Sprawling over 1,500 square miles, the Fens fall across the counties of Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, and Norfolk. Their history is as rich as their fertile soils and just under 90% of the land is cultivated. Fen soil accounts for about half of all grade 1 land in England, meaning it is of 'excellent quality agricultural land, with no or very minor limitations to agricultural use' (Natural England).



It was the Romans who first recognised the marshlands' great farming potential and in the 17th century the systematic draining of the Fens began in earnest, turning it into some of the richest farmland in the world.

Today we are visiting Waterland, one of our beloved local producers, situated just outside the picturesque village of Lode. You will often receive their produce in your veg boxes as they grow an impressive range of crops, including apples, squashes, lettuces, kohlrabi, leeks, kale, courgettes, radishes and spring onions.

Paul and Doreen have farmed this land for over 30 years. Paul's Cambridgeshire farming family history stretches back for

generations. It was Paul who, back in 1990, after finishing agricultural college and being a member of the Soil Association, started converting the land to organic. He began with just one acre of the 65-acre family farm under the sceptical eye of his father, who dismissed it as 'peasant farming'. By the end of the decade, father and the rest of the family were on board and the whole farm was certified organic.

Paul and Doreen love the land they cultivate, and their long-term aims are to support the regeneration of the soils and the environment that nourishes them. Fen soils are vulnerable to wind erosion which in turn releases CO₂. As Paul explains, "One of the reasons why we converted in the first place is because it's a family farm and you want it to be around for quite a few future generations, and with most of the land decaying in its topsoil a little bit each year, half an inch each year ... the way we farm, by putting in green manures and leaving bits rough round the edges and putting in trees, it just helps to keep that top soil intact and keep it regenerated."

Waterland were one of the first UK farms to have an agricultural planter for watering. The planter works by applying

water only at the roots of the plants, therefore minimising waste of this most precious resource.

For a time, Waterland supplied large national supermarket chains, due to their being at the forefront of the organic farming movement. However, in recent years they have been out-priced by huge agricultural operations and the slashing of prices paid by the large vendors. They have returned to supplying local wholesale customers and the continued running of their Community Supported Agriculture box scheme, which started in 1993.

This year, things are changing again at Waterland. Paul and Doreen have taken the steps to move into a shared farm agreement, with one of their long-term workers and volunteers, Helen. Helen grew up with green-fingered parents, went on to study botany and has always had a keen interest in agriculture. They were drawn to the positivity they encountered at Waterland and the volunteer-based Cropshare scheme, where food was grown and shared among the volunteers and farm. They became more and more involved with their time at the farm until it developed into a 'full-time farming addiction'

Helen has now taken over the running of the CSA box scheme and produces some of the summer wholesale crops.

"
You can't farm
in a box. It's all
part of a natural
system **"**



Helen is truly passionate about farming with nature. "The farming lifestyle is addictive," they say, "being out in a field, trying to have a space where you can have food coming from it ... You can really look after it, but it can also be really functional as a food source for local people."

Helen shows me some cover crops, which are essential for maintaining the health of the soil and will eventually become green manure. They talk about the biodiversity under the canopy of these crops, as well as in the rough grasses and wild field margins around the farm. These wild areas are all functional parts of the farm: they attract birds, aphids, bees, and ladybirds among others, which all help natural pollination and pest control. "You can't farm in a box," they state. "It's all part of a natural system. We literally farm with nature; I need nature to farm."

Waterland is a very special place, lying peacefully under the huge skies of the Fens. If you are interested in volunteering with Helen and Waterland you can contact them on robinson.doreen@gmail.com or helen@waterlandorganics.com.



4 Top Tips for Healthy Soil



1. Don't use chemicals

Using chemicals, including herbicides, pesticides, and chemical fertilisers, is a sure-fire way to kill life in your soil. Chemicals can remain in the soil for years, and won't just stay in one place as they filter through the soil when it rains.

2. Keep your soil covered

Don't leave earth bare. Instead, cover it with leaves, wood chips or dried grass clippings. Or, you could plant cover crops, or green manure. This prevents weeds from growing, stops moisture being lost, and retains nutrients in the soil.

3. Layer up; don't dig

Gently disturbing soils can help to keep them aerated, but double digging and turning the soils can destroy soil structure and the microbiome. Instead, build up your soils by adding layers of organic matter for example compost, mulch or manure.

4. Keep adding organic material

The importance of composting! Make sure you build soil health by adding organic material, such as vegetable scraps, grass clippings, coffee grinds and leaves. This way you're proactively adding nutrients back into the soil.

BECOME A CAMBRIDGE ORGANIC VEG BOX MEMBER

We're the local vegetable people

Since 1998 we have been delivering organic veg boxes to the Cambridge area with produce sourced from local farms.



STEP 1. Visit us at www.cambridgeorganic.co.uk and click 'get started'.

STEP 2. Enter your postcode to see what day of the week we deliver to your area, and then choose your first delivery date.

STEP 3. Choose your type of veg and/or fruit box, add any extras, choose your regularity and go to checkout!

STEP 4. You will be asked to set up a direct debit as your weekly or fortnightly deliveries continue automatically after your first order. However you can cancel membership at any time so you are not locked into any subscription.

STEP 5. Wait for your box of delicious, organic, fresh and local produce to be delivered to your door in one of our fully electric vans by our friendly delivery team!

Any questions please email us at hello@cambridgeorganic.co.uk or call 01223 873300

