

Zenxin—an organic farming journey

The public is concerned over farm produce that could be tainted with pesticides and other harmful chemicals hence there has been a growing demand for organic food—food produced without the use of harmful chemicals. This is the story of how Zenxin got involved in organic farming.

By P.S. Tong

I met Tai Seng Yee, Executive Director of Zenxin Agri-Organic Food Company at an organic farming workshop organized by University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) in June 2014. Having seen organic vegetables carrying the Zenxin label at local supermarkets, I immediately informed Seng Yee about the upcoming UTAR Agriculture Science Journal (UASJ) and asked if he would be interested in being interviewed about Zenxin’s organic farming experience. He readily agreed.

We met again in February 2015 at the Zenxin Organic Park in Kluang, Johor, which is an educational and recreational facility



L-R: Tai Seng Yee, P. S. Tong and Tai Kok Kong

incorporating a model farm for guided tours, a restaurant, a shop selling organic products, and a flower nursery selling potted plants and horticultural items. About 50% of the visitors are from Singapore.



The service counter

Over cups of Zenxin’s own organic mulberry tea, we talked about organic farming. We were soon joined by Seng Yee’s father, Tai Kok Kong.

It began in 2002 when Tai Kok Kong bought a careful of organic cabbage from Cameron Highlands to share with family in Kluang. Feedback was



The organic products shop



Organic banana "*Pisang 40 hari*"



The restaurant

unanimous. The organic cabbage was tastier than the cabbages sold in the local market, and reminded Kok Kong of what cabbages tasted like when he was a boy. This became an inspiration for Kok Kong. There was an added incentive. Kok Kong was, and still is, a highly successful chicken farmer, and he had branched out into manufacturing organic fertilizers from chicken manure using Japanese fermentation technology. He had excess capacity in organic fertilizers that could be used support a new organic farming venture.

Kok Kong started his new venture in organic farming with a 200 acre farm in Gua Musang in the state of Kelantan, 700 km north of Kluang. He had been informed that a true organic farm had to be far away from cities and towns, and on a piece of very clean land. To many Malaysians, Gua Musang is like what Siberia is to the Russians. The farm was carved out of the jungle. Kok Kong would drive for 10 hours to visit his farm and Seng Yee accompanied his father on many of these trips. This went on for several years until the Gua Musang venture was replaced by a more practical business model.



Dragon fruit seedlings in the flower nursery



The organic mulberry farm



Green houses

In the new model, Zenxin operates four farms of its own, and gets 30% of its supplies from 20 other farms under contract. The contract farms are small owner-managed organic farms in Cameron Highlands, Banting, Raub, Ipoh and Kluang. Collectively, these organic farms produce vegetables, sweet potatoes, fruits, and mushrooms, each specialising in what they produce best. Seng Yee observes that the owner-managed farms are more trustworthy as they take care of their farms as they would their homes. Moreover, they are highly productive because the owners work alongside their hired workers, and this makes a big difference. Central to the whole operation is certification by the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA). NASAA Certified Organic (NCO) is an Australian and international certifier of organic produce and supply chains, established in 1986. Zenxin and all its associated farms are audited and certified by NASAA.

Zenxin markets internationally and locally. In Malaysia it supplies big supermarket chains like AEON, but it has also opened its own retail outlets. In a period



Zenxin's own active organic fertilizer



Dragon fruit sheltered from rain



Dragon fruit exposed to rain

of thirteen years, Zenxin has set up ten shops selling organic agriculture produce and organic health food—nine in Malaysia and one in Singapore. The nine shops in Malaysia include one in Kuala Lumpur, two in Melaka, three in Johor Bahru and three in Kluang.

Zenxin had to face many challenges in organic farming. One was the soil they started with, which was mostly clayey subsoil devoid of organic matter. Such soil had to be rectified by growing corn and ploughing in the corn as organic matter. It took years to improve the soil.

Vegetables have to be grown without the use of disallowed chemical pesticides but at the same time, consumers want products to look good—for example, leafy vegetables must be without holes.

Many greenhouses have been built for growing vegetables and these can get uncomfortably hot and humid, especially when the sides are netted. Do we really need a plastic roof and netted sides for growing organic vegetables? As it happened, the weather was dry and breezy during our visit. Seng Yee remarked that this is



Organic vegetables in a greenhouse



Organic spinach



The 40-day banana "*Pisang 40 Hari*"

‘Chinese New Year weather’ which occurs in January-February, which he has observed to be the most productive period for the organic farms in Johore. By implication, still humid air is not good. Understanding the environment and managing it is very important.

One interesting experiment involved the growing of dragon fruits under transparent plastic roofing to keep out rain. Dragon fruit plants have been devastated by a disease that causes the plants to rot. Keeping out the rain has been found by Zenxin to be effective in keeping the plants free of disease. The plants under roofing are watered with piped water directed at the base of each plant. Under these rain-free and controlled irrigation conditions, the plants are healthy and fruitful. An indirect benefit is that with watering focused at the base of each dragon fruit plant, there is less water for the proliferation of weeds.

Elsewhere, weed management is a continual problem because weeds proliferate rapidly and compete with crops for water, nutrients, space and light, and manual weeding is very labour-intensive.



Organic brinjal (egg plant or aubergine)

It appears to us that the rate of experiment and innovation needs to be speeded up to make organic farming less labour-intensive. Zenxin's development has been somewhat of a roller coaster ride, from chicken farming to fertilizer-processing, setting up organic farms, organizing an organic farming network, marketing nationally and internationally, opening retail

outlets, establishing an agricultural park and now running an office in Singapore. One cannot stop and get off. For Seng Yee, who began as a small town boy who spoke no English, it has been quite a journey to his present position, continuing what his father started, managing what is set to grow as an international enterprise.