

The Faces Behind Our Food

Interview with Alan Schofield, Growing With Nature

Interviewer: Anna Clayton

Johnny Bean also present

Duration: 29 minutes.21 seconds

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Location: Bradshaw Lane Nursery, Pilling, Preston, Lancashire, PR3 6AX

Time (minutes.seconds)	Interview transcript
0.10	<p>OK, ummm, so can you tell me a little about yourself and growing with nature; so when you were founded, how many people you work with, and what you do?</p> <p>OK, we started Growing With Nature in 1980...sorry 1992. I have been an organic vegetable grower since 1982 and for the first ten years I was working for and with another organic vegetable grower here in the village of Pilling who was called Douglas Blair, who was primarily a long season tomato, cucumber and pepper grower. I complemented his crops by growing outdoor lettuce, radish, salad onions – to increase the sort of salad range if you like.</p>
0.46	<p>Ummm at the end of my work with Douglas, me and Debra left when we purchased Bradshaw Lane nursery- which is where we are now- and we decided we wanted to go in a different direction.</p>
0.56	<p>At the time the supermarkets weren't selling very much fruit and vegetables because it was a highly perishable crop, and they couldn't manage it correctly. And, by the early 1990s they were starting to get interested in purchasing more and more crops and organics was in its boom days in the early 90s- and that was when me and Debra started our organic box scheme, which is a mixture of seasonal veg delivered to people's homes on a weekly or fortnightly basis. So we have been doing that from 1992 through to the present day.</p>
1.29	<p>We are many; we are a very small horticultural unit. Anybody who's over 50 will probably remember the market gardeners of the past, and I like to consider that all we are doing here at Growing With Nature is actually continuing that old tradition of market garden i.e. producing a wide range of crops and selling them as locally as we can.</p>
1.51	<p>And the box scheme works absolutely brilliantly for us because we do not declare, other than the week before, what is going to be in the boxes, and this allows us to shift seasonal surpluses due to inclement weather, or periods of hot weather during which crops flush, and it also allows us to give people a really good flavour of what's in season this week, and the many different tastes and textures of the season.</p>
2.19	<p>As I say, we are mainly a family business- there is me and Debra employed here,</p>



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The Faces Behind Our Food

	our son Christopher is employed here and our grandson works for us during the summer when he is not at university. We have two other part timers who work for us – Sue and Jonathon – and then we also have a volunteer day, every Thursday. And we attract volunteers mainly from all over the North West. [OK, thank you] .
2.39	And so, what key events have led to you growing organic veg in Pilling? Are there any moments that stand out for you? When I was starting off in agriculture, which is basically as soon as I left school in the mid-1970s, agriculture was undergoing quite a chemical revolution. And I worked on a lot of farms that were starting to use chemicals whereas maybe they had never used them before, and I just felt there had to be a different way, other than using some of these chemicals. Which again, in the mid-1970s, were not as specific or as target or as crop-target specific as they are today, and did an awful lot of environmental damage which organisations like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth in the day were starting to pick up.
3.30	Ummm I was very fortunate in the fact that at the time, after leaving school, I was working in Devon, and I met a character called Mark Purdey, who was one of the first commercial organic farmers in the UK. And Mark took me under his wing, showed me around his farm, and showed me how he did things differently. And it's on that very strong foundation that I came back to Lancashire ummm in the early 80s and actually hooked up with Doug Blaire, who was again one of the pioneer organic vegetable growers in the UK and I have not looked back since. I have never, I never...All my vegetable producing career, I have always grown organically. So we have been growing organically now for 36 years. [OK] .
4.12	So for people who maybe don't know what organic means or is, can you briefly summarise... 99.9% of our food these days is produced with some form of chemical assistance or another. So whether it be highly soluble chemical fertilisers that are just designed to feed the plant and do not take any account of the soil life. Whether it is a pesticide which kills all the pests obviously, or an herbicide which is there for killing weeds. We use none of these. We use completely different approaches.
4.45	To an organic grower the soil is our most important asset. And it is a living, breathing entity and as such, needs all of the things that life requires. So it needs feeding, it needs aerating, and this we do very gently with different machines than conventional farmers will use. When it comes to keeping the weeds down, we either use stale seed beds which mean we prepare the ground well-ahead of time and get a weed strike using either hoes or tractor-braced machines or even a flame gun. Or we will use biodegradable corn starch mulch which we lay on the soil surface and then plant through. And this helps us get over many of the weeds.
5.26	As regards many of the pests, a lot of them are aerial and so we will use crop covers- known as crop fleeces. These are very very light weight, white, woven materials that we literally lay over the crop. And as the crop grows and develops it literally pushes the fleece up. But it prevents things like green fly and cabbage

The Faces Behind Our Food

	white butterflies laying their eggs on the crops, and so we don't get invaded by caterpillars, we don't get green fly outbreaks.
5.54	And then when it comes to the fertility, for our crops we grow what is known as green manures. We are a vegan, organic holding here which means we don't use any animal products, or any animal manures in our growing system. And I started this when, in the late 90s, when BSE was first heard about. I was very, very frightened that whatever it was that was causing mad cow disease, or BSE as it became known, ummm could have been transmitted from the animal to a human being via its manures. And again, no matter how clean you are, if you are using animal manures there is a potential risk of cross contamination.
6.37	So we withdrew all animal manures and moved on to a system of green manures and making our own compost. And so, inside the polytunnels, the fertility is there is based upon our own compost. Out on the field it is based upon green manure crops which are crops like nitrogen fixing clover crops- and we grow 3-4 different varieties of clover throughout the year. Or things like ummm Hungarian grazing rye which is a grass type crop but it's a cereal. Or winter tairs which is like an overwintering pea crop. All of these crops will soak up the readily available nutrition that's made during the summer months, hold them in their bodies, and then I mow that and incorporate it into the top 2 or 3 inches of the soil, which is where the majority of the soil life lives. And so what I am doing, is, I'm providing that life, that organic material feeds the soil biota and then in turn that soil biota provides me with the nutrition that I need to grow my crops. And a walk around the holding to see the vitality and the greenness of the crops shows that we are not lacking in any of the key major nutrients necessary for crop growth. [OK].
7.43	So, what do you enjoy most about your work and what do you enjoy least? Not having a boss! (laughs) That is very definitely one of the big pluses. Being able to get up on a sunny morning, and just walk across the yard and listen to the curlews crying as I go to work. Urgh, that is so uplifting.
8.02	Ummm, I suppose we could be called feeders in the fact that one of our main missions in life, is to make sure that everybody who we ever come across has a full belly, and that belly is full of top quality, prime organic nutrition- mainly of a vegetable nature because that is what we grow! What do I like least about it? Probably picking Brussel sprouts at minus ten. (laughs) Where they are so frozen onto the plant that you almost need a chisel to get them off... Working out when the wind is blowing a force nine and the rains going horizontal. But even I can find pleasure in doing that occasionally. Ummm so there are very few down sides.
8.43	I think, one of the things that has changed in my lifetime is people's appreciation of where their food comes from and the importance that we as a society place upon that. I notice that whenever I am in France or Italy, that the food culture over there is much different than it is here. And we seem to have embraced the ready meal, the processed food, the pre-prepared food, eating out much more so, in

The Faces Behind Our Food

	a way, than our foreign counterparts have.
9.15	And therefore I feel that the value that people place upon local production has gone down over my lifetime. So actually making it so that it is financially viable when you've got supermarkets waring against each other over price, when they have other lines so they can do loss leaders, we haven't got other lines and so we have to charge a realistic price for our vegetables to remain financially viable. [hmmm].
9.38	So, you touched on a lot of this, but are there any other key changes that you have noticed in the farming industry since you first started? I think one of the biggest is that, I mean I grew up and went to school in Blackpool. I was educated at Arnold School, which was a boys only school down south shore in Blackpool. And within a five minute walk at a lunch time, beyond our playing fields, I was in an absolute haven of market gardens. All of these market gardens were producing a plethora of different crops and the majority of all of those crops were being sold locally into the fruit and vegetable merchants within Blackpool, into the hotel trade within Blackpool.
10.21	All of that has changed in my lifetime and all of those market gardens have now gone. And now we are almost a rarity in our area; of a small-scale market-gardening vegetable family, still producing a wide range of vegetables and selling them locally.
10.37	On the other side, obviously technology has increased phenomenally over the last 35 years. And we have seen the advent of things like thermo-formed plastics, cold-chain supply solutions, which has allowed the bigger marketers' to, if you like, encroach on what was our domain 30, 40 years ago. As I said earlier, they once refused to deal in fruit and vegetables because of its perishable nature. And yet, with advances in technology such as the mentioned thermos-formed plastics, modified atmosphere packaging, cold chain from field to plate; this has revolutionised the marketing arena and has allowed the much bigger stores...
11.20	And what this has lead too is much bigger farms. And the thing that frightens me about that, is that in, an era that we are living through at the moment where climate change is becoming more and more real as every year turns, that on a small scale if I am flooded, then we lose quite a small amount of production. I know of 1000 and 2000 acre vegetable farms that over the last five years have more or less lost all of their production. And that is, not only financially damaging for the farm, it completely and utterly wipes them out. Whereas we can survive because we can adapt and change what it is that we are doing. And I just think that seeing as food is one of <i>the key</i> important ingredients to human existence, how <i>little</i> emphasis we place upon its wellbeing and food production.
12.11	So, I think the changes, you know they have been good for our burgeoning society, but we have lost a lot of local production, we've lost a lot of local production skills, we have lost a lot of the localised varieties that growers like myself used to grow 40 years ago. And nowadays it is a global seeds trade, it is

The Faces Behind Our Food

	a global food trade and yet it is little over 60 years since a little man with the first name of Adolf actually cut our fair nation isle off from the rest of the world and if that was to happen today, 74% of the fruit and vegetables that are on our supermarket shelves would disappear overnight.
12.53	As I have said in the past, we are only nine meals from anarchy as a society. (sound of voices in distance).
12.59	<p>So you touched on climate change, can you build on that a little more? Have you noticed the impacts of climate change becoming a real issue for you as a farmer? And how have you adapted?</p> <p>When I first moved to Pilling and started farming these very very rich fertile silty soils that we have here in Pilling, which are quite good soils as regards fertility, ummm for growing crops like vegetables. I used to grow the same, more or less the same range of vegetables that I grow today, but I used to do things like overwinter my carrots outdoors because we didn't have the intensity of the rainfall events that we are now seeing. Ummm I think we actually experience one quite serious flood in our first 20 years here at Bradshaw Lane. And we have experienced four quite serious floods in the last six years here at Bradshaw Lane. Though the intensity of rainfall events seems to me to be increasing. Our lands are sitting wetter for longer throughout the year. This has meant that weeding is getting more and more of a bind because organic systems of weed control rely upon the soil being dry enough to desiccate the weeds and that takes two or three days. And it's been very, very difficult these last two summers to find those two or three days when our soils will remain dry.</p>
12.33	So we have had to adapt the way that we grow. We are using a lot more weed control mulches than we ever used to use. We are not growing overwintering carrots as they now rot in the ground. (laughter in distance and washing machines) We have given up growing parsnips completely because our ground has become unsuitable- again due to waterlogging, due to the more intense rainfall events. (voices in distance) And we have started growing more summer crops that we know we have got good summer conditions for growing. Crops like the squash- these crops have become more enjoyed by society in my lifetime and admittedly, they weren't around some 20 – 30 years ago. But these are perfect crops for us because we can grow them, harvest them while they're still, the ground is still workable in September, and then store them inside the, poly tunnels and buildings right through until January – so we have a four months sales window. And we are moving on to more crops like that as climate change bites.
15.34	My big fear is that we are just going to get warmer and wetter and that the storm and rain events are going to become more ferocious. [hmmm, yeah. Ummm OK.. and so...]
15.51	<p>What about Brexit. Do you see the leave vote having an impact on the organic industry or farming? In general?</p> <p>I see it having an effect upon farming because I believe the figure is in excess of 70% of UK agricultural production is now exported, which, to me, being an island</p>

The Faces Behind Our Food

	nation is again a nonsense. We are importing 75% of what we eat and are exporting 70%+ of what we produce. And I think Brexit, I trade across borders and between nations, is probably going to have an impact on one form of another in the big Ag environment.
16.29	I also see that big Ag is supported by subsidies. Many, many large scale farmers, who in effect don't need the subsidies receive very, very large subsidy cheques, and while we have been a part of Europe, and if you like, it's been the European pot that's been paying those subsidies, will that continue when it is the UK government that have to pay and write £100,000+ cheques to what are already very wealthy farmers and land owners?
16.54	Whether that will change and we will move more onto the European model of how their money is spent i.e. supporting people like myself and many small-scale localised producers, that is a hope of mine. And I will certainly be part of some of those discussions within DEFRA, and certainly within the organic movement through the Organic Research Centre and our own organisation – the Organic Growers Alliance. We will be fighting for more support for the smaller scale localised producer, because not only do we see that as a risk-mitigator against climate change, and local food production, we also see that any international trade is not going to affect that trade. Ummm I think it's going to be more difficult for us to import certain crops, and I think we will see a price rise on some crops- especially those that are traded globally in the dollar, seeing as the pound has fallen so much against the dollar. Ummm as regards our own business, I am incredibly hopeful that as some of these changes take place, <i>hopefully</i> , as I say, more people will support people like ourselves that are producing locally, paying local labour and encouraging more people to work in our beautiful countryside.
18.15	So, you mentioned the Organic Growers Alliance, can you just tell us a bit more about what that is and what you do? The Organic Growers Alliance was first set up under a slightly different name – called the Organic Growers Association way back in the mid 80's, just as commercial organic growing was starting here within the UK. It was originally set up as a support and representative body of organic horticulturalists and market gardeners, vegetable producers, fruit producers... And the whole idea of it basically was that we as the growers were, if you like, trying to take more control over our destiny. So instead of being told by a minister from an unknown government department, or a sub division of what was in the day the Ministry of Agriculture, these days the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; ummm we wanted to be able to communicate on mass to these people and felt that a representative and support organisation.
19.21	So these days we are the Organic Growers Alliance. We are an alliance of small to medium scale vegetable and fruit producers, not just here in within the UK but within Europe. We have 250 UK members at the moment, ummm, who are mainly producing quite wide ranges of crops; mainly marketing locally and direct to the consumer. We get together on an annual basis at least two or three times. So we run an AGM, we run a conference- the Organic Producers Conference- along with ummm Elm farm. (mobile phone ringing).

The Faces Behind Our Food

	<p>And the idea of that is that again we look at the technical aspects of production. And ummm (laughs). What the hell is that?! (laughs) [Debra: not mine] Thank you!</p>
20.11	<p>So, ummm, yes. On an annual basis we are running, ummm, two or three national events. So we will have a get together on a grower's holding. Ummm, we like to go to other grower's holdings. We love looking at other people's weeds, and love hearing their disaster stories, as well of course hearing success stories from which we all learn. It is amazing how, when you bring like-minded people together who are all working in the same arena, how the innovation flows. And what may be an inconsequential little development that I made 20 years ago that I have used most of my growing career, but to a newcomer that could actually revolutionise how they do things - like sowing seeds and make them that little bit more efficient which will of course help them their financial viability.</p>
21.02	<p>We are very against re-inventing the wheel on every organic holding in the country. So if we have learnt the correct crop spacing for growing lets say crops of baby leaf spinach or crops of salad leaves, then of course we freely pass on that information either through the forum on our website (www.organicgrowersalliance.co.uk), or through our magazine which we publish quarterly- the Organic Grower- again available through our website or as a member of our magazine. Again, the whole thrust of that is the support side of it, which is the technical – how do you do this? And what is the best way to do this?</p>
21.40	<p>We also do crop reports on a quarterly basis from around the country; weather reports on an annual, on a quarterly basis from around the country – just because farming can be such an isolating business. You can sit for hours and hours and hours listening to radio 4 on the tractor radio, not talking or seeing another human being. So, to have that feeling of comradery – that there are other people like you trying to achieve the same aims and goals that you are doing is a wonderful, wonderful support mechanism. And again, when it comes to representation, to be around that table inside DEFRA; to be around that table inside the Organic Research Centre, or the Soil Association, or within Organic Farmers and Growers (two of the certification bodies that we all have to licence with as organic producers here in the UK). To take part in those discussion, to help influence the future and the way that we take organic production.</p>
22.36	<p>Sometimes the needs and wishes of a consumer are slightly at odds with the needs and wishes of a producer and to negotiate through, what can be seen as a brick wall, to my mind is a better way forward that just telling people no, this is how we do it and this, we've got to do it this way. I think that once people are educated and understand why things are done in a certain way, then they will accept it much more freely than if they are being told they have to do it that way. [OK]. (washing machine beeping, mobile phone ringing)</p>
23.06	<p>Ummm, so can I ask about the volunteers? You have you started having volunteers come on a Thursday?</p>

The Faces Behind Our Food

	<p>(phone ringing) [Ummm, I'll wait.] What is that? [Debra: Its David's telephone]. [There we are. Volunteers? Maybe you want to come on this?] [Debra: I'm not a volunteer!] [I know but your thoughts?] [Debra: It's compulsory..] It's compulsory!?</p>
23.28	<p>So, why have you started having volunteers come here, and what do they bring? And what do you hope from, from the Thursday volunteer day? All of the volunteers, we started using volunteers about five years ago. As the recession really bit on our business and people were told through the daily rags and every news bulletin on the daily news that you've got to tighten your belts, don't waste everything, look at your food usage etc. etc. we saw our business basically fall off a cliff.</p>
24.00	<p>And over the nine years of the recession we lost over 70% of our trade. So, we have had to adapt to the new world order, if you like. And to me, even though were managing to keep on top of the crop production, there are a lot of ancillary jobs that farmers do -looking after the environment, coppicing trees, making sure everything is kept neat and tidy etc.</p>
24.28	<p>Not just from an aesthetic point of view – but as I was explaining earlier, our production system is an agro-forestry system and that includes allowing wild belts of thistles and nettles and docs to grow through their lifecycle because all of these plants are important for insects. Insects are important for birdlife. And if you want to be considering the environment, we have to be considering that from the ground up and make sure that each part of that chain is in place so that we have each part of the ecosystem functioning correctly. It has taken me 30+ years to develop the organic system that we are now producing on today, and, I feel that we were just not keeping on top, if you like, our environmental management. So a lot of the work that we do with the volunteers is keeping that side of it under control. A lot of the people who approach us to come and volunteer here are either back garden gardeners; they're looking to take on an allotment. And what they are looking to get out of the deal is to increase their knowledge of how to produce vegetables. And I don't think there is anything better than working alongside somebody like myself, because I have the confines that the amateur gardener doesn't have which is the commercial world.</p>
25.46	<p>We are looking to produce top quality, that is on a par with the supermarket quality. So we are looking to be innovative in the crops that we produce- so we are always trialling new crops and if I can shortcut some of the mistakes that amateur gardeners make, and the best one- the best example- is lettuce.</p>
26.08	<p>You go along to the garden centre and you buy a packet of lettuce seeds and you sow them. And up sprout 120 lettuces which you all prick out and then you go and plant out 120 lettuces. And show me a human being that can eat more than one lettuce a week. So that 119 that you've just wasted. Now with me telling</p>

The Faces Behind Our Food

	you how it works, you've got that ground which you just wasted 119 lettuces in to grow other crops.
26.31	And things like tomatoes and cucumbers – these are quite tricky plants when you first start off - to actually get them to yield a good yield throughout the season. And again, some of the mistakes that are made: you are growing that baby cucumber plant until along comes along that first cucumber and we love it and nurture it as if it's a child of ours. From the plant's point of view "I've just had a child, I can die now". And so the amateur gardener gets one very large, horrible, cucumber per plant. I like to achieve 25-30 cucumbers per plant on my commercial system. And to do that, I take off all those young babies, until we have a plant that is capable of not only supporting cucumbers but also still growing to produce more. And its little tips like this, that no matter how much I teach or lecture, there is nothing like working with those plants and being there watching them grow week in week out to actually take that knowledge in.
27.36	So I feel the volunteers get that. They also get the most amazing slap up vegetarian, in season, fully organic meal at lunch time, so they go home exceptionally satisfied. One of our present gang of volunteers said to my wife, my lovely wife Debra, that if all vegetarian food tasted like this, I'd be a vegetarian! (Laughter). Well it's not that difficult folks. (laughter) It really isn't.
28.00	And I think, also, from our perspective, day in day out there is work to be done. Day in day out, yes we have a good social life here- as you've both seen this morning while you've been here. There's lots of banter, there's lots of laughter. But to have a new dynamic in that mix, and to learn about somebody else's life...and maybe they are doing a job that they are not one hundred per cent happy with. Maybe they're job is very stressful and all they want to do is come for a day in the country with no, real time limits on them; no real...we don't work people like slaves contrary to urgh popular belief. We do like to have fun. We do like to have a good crack. And at the end of the day, if you go home with a full belly, a monstrous bag of local seasonal vegetables, a big smile on your face and little bit of a change of colour of your sun tan, then we've had a good day. And we have achieved jobs that we weren't getting through as regards the commercial side to our business. To me it's a win-win situation.
29.04	Ok. And then, is there anything else that we haven't covered? Challenges you face or the industry faces...
29.13	Eat, more, vegetables! (laughs). Full stop. (laughs) [Great, I'll stop it there then.] Was that OK for you? [It's perfect]