



## Postgraduate Organic Farming students at SRUC: past and present

*Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) has a 25-year history of postgraduate teaching in Organic Farming and Sustainable Agriculture, and converted to an online distance learning format for the postgraduate programme in Organic Farming in 2002. Since then they have had over one hundred MSc graduates, and many more students completing the Postgraduate Diploma. Programme Leader Dr Lou Ralph caught up with a few of them to find out why they embarked on the programme and what it's meant to them.*

### Caithriona McCarthy (MSc graduate 2014)

Signing up to the MSc in Organic Farming turned out to be one of the most challenging experiences of my life - and also one of the most worthwhile.

I was in my 40's and teaching organic horticulture in the West of Ireland. I'd always been interested in food and how it's grown. Studying for the MSc equipped me with the knowledge and confidence to set up an educational organisation, the Edible Landscape Project, in 2012, on which I based my MSc thesis. As a social enterprise the Edible Landscape Project teaches local communities about the connection between Climate Change and - you guessed it - Food! The Edible Landscape Project is still up and running in the West of Ireland. I still teach Sustainable Horticulture and Entrepreneurship. The MSc in Organic Farming is definitely food for thought...



### Tracy Wathen-Jones (MSc graduate 2014)

I grew up with small scale dairy farming and was a member and secretary of Winchester Junior Young Farmers. I subsequently studied and worked in nature conservation for 12 years. I later moved to Ireland where I ran my own smallholding alongside a landscape gardening business and award winning independent garden centre which I established with my husband. I studied first for my FETAC 5 Organic Horticulture, then SRUC's MSc in Organic Farming and IFOAM's EU Organic Leadership programme. Since returning to the UK five years ago I have been a director of the Community Supported Agriculture Network UK and have travelled to South Korea for an IFOAM Organic Leadership masterclass. My passion is finding and communicating integrative approaches to improve the health of people, planet, biodiversity, soil and livestock.

### John Twyford (MSc graduate 2016)

I did the MSc in Organic Farming at SRUC while farm business manager at Old Plaw Hatch Farm, a mixed biodynamic farm in Sussex. What interested me most about the course was its rigorous, critical and scientific approach to organic farming. For example, it helped me to understand the most important aspects of soil management from the perspective of an organic land manager. I learned about the established benefits of organic farming to food quality and to society. At the same time the course challenged me to explore and face the legitimate arguments that are presented against organic farming. The course also provided a good overview of the organic market and the farm visits provided useful insights. I was able to implement much of what I learned on the farm.



I also met some very interesting people from various walks of life who all shared a passion for organic farming. There isn't another course like it and I am very glad that it continues to thrive. After a year at Riverford Farm in Devon, I am just finishing an MBA. Between these two programmes and my own experience, I now feel very well equipped to contribute to organic farm businesses that seek to demonstrate exceptional husbandry and financial success.

### Megan Batt (MSc graduate 2017)

I was a postgraduate Organic Farming distance learning student with SRUC whilst working as a shepherdess in the Scottish Borders. I had worked on a variety of organic farms and wanted to progress by gaining a formal qualification in the subject. The course was hugely influential, both in cementing my fundamental knowledge and widening my perspective of organic farming and the industry as a whole. My thesis looked at pursuing an organic sheep dairy enterprise in the Scottish Borders. Two years later, I now have a small flock of 70 sheep with my partner. We're not milking them, but along with Cheviots we have chosen to keep some Dorsets, a multipurpose breed, which are used in the sheep dairy industry (so you never know!). I hugely enjoyed the SRUC experience and now feel well equipped to move forward within the organic sector.



### Robby Gass (MSc graduate 2017)

With more than 25 years of South African conventional and mixed organic farming experience I returned to Scotland, the land of my forebears, in 2013. Finding work in farming here was very difficult at first, but I was appointed manager of a horticultural training nursery and after completing the MSc opportunities opened up. My income grew to a new level, I was given more responsibility with autonomy and my opinion was treated with higher regard throughout.



I then started Alba Organics, an independent organic consultancy business, serving to improve the operations of experienced and prospective organic farmers with farms of various sizes and descriptions in Britain and Europe. I also lecture on Organic Food Production and Horticultural Science at Ayrshire College, constantly promoting the choice of organic food for a better planet with a healthy future.

The camaraderie between my fellow students and the staff at the SRUC was very special over the three years of study and it lives on regardless of the distances. The MSc Organic Farming degree is a game changer, for sure! It's changed my life.



### Harm Rijneveld (MSc graduate 2017)

I started the MSc to give me more opportunities in (organic farming) teaching. I was raised on a small farm in the Netherlands, which was not officially organic, but we worked with low inputs and were nearly self-sufficient. Because of this and a work placement at an organic farm in the Netherlands, I became convinced by organic principles.



During the course I learned more about organic farming, farming in general and grazing management, which was the subject of my thesis.

After finishing the MSc I wanted a new challenge and applied for a teaching job at the Aeres University of Applied Sciences in Dronten. I'm working 50% as a tutor in livestock at the vocational college and 50% as a lecturer in dairy farming at the university. At both institutes I'm teaching about dairy but also about organic farming. The MSc brought me a lot of knowledge and the opportunity to get a job at a higher level. Using my knowledge from SRUC I set up a final year degree option about organic farming at the university in Dronten, which in the Dutch system is available to students from across the university network.

In the coming years I hope to teach future farmers about organic farming. As well as that I hope to become a part-time advisor in organic farming and nutrient cycles

### Philip Day (current Year 2 PGDip student 2019-2020)

I'm 55 and although I have been an organic farm manager for many years I have no qualifications in the subject and I wanted to verify and consolidate my knowledge and experience into a recognisable qualification. The course has been stimulating in terms of content and also by sharing views and experiences with fellow participants from various backgrounds. Already, I have a better understanding of organics as a holistic approach rather than just a set of standards to follow. I think a little more carefully about how I farm and have made several small changes to our system. I'm certain the course will enable me to manage my farm more sustainably, more sympathetically and more profitably. Beyond farm management I hope to be able use my knowledge to advise and help others, enabling me to extend my agricultural career.



### David McKay (current Year 1 PGDip student 2019-20)

I applied to the Organic Farming PGDip/ MSc because I was hoping to turn a hobby of growing vegetables into a potential new career. I did so with some hesitation, as my professional background is in journalism and I have little practical experience of farming. So far, the course has been very enjoyable, and I would say inspiring and challenging in equal measure. Like many others, I am juggling coursework with family commitments and work. I started up my own freelance PR/communications business, Field Media Strategy, at the same time as I began the SRUC course, which has kept me busy to say the least!



Lou and the rest of the staff have all been fantastic – and extremely helpful on the first study weekend. My new classmates are a very friendly and enthusiastic bunch. We hail from all corners of the UK, Ireland and Europe, but share a passion for all things organic. Looking forward to the rest of the course!

### Roger Rabbitte (current Year 2 PGDip student 2019-20)

Participation in the course has allowed me to deepen my knowledge of organic farming systems suitable to my local environment. It has improved my understanding of soils, fertility, grasses, green manures, weed control, crops, livestock, financial costings, farm accounting and marketing. The course has enabled me to source up to date information and statistics as well as relate with people of similar interests including those more experienced in various aspects of the organic food sector. Overall, the course will give me the confidence and knowledge to find an improved, well scrutinized and viable direction for my small farm, which was the fundamental reason why I joined the course. The course is time-consuming but achievable. It gets you thinking and I would encourage anyone interested to apply.

### Alison Goldberger (current MSc student 2019-20)

I'm Scottish, but live in Austria where I run an organic arable and pig farm with my husband. The course has really helped me in my work as an organic farmer. My background is in journalism and I don't come from a farm, so I didn't know too much about the practical side of farming before I started. The course has been really useful in my life as an organic farmer – I'm now confident with crop rotations and understanding soil analysis results. I've also learned a lot from the other students in the course, and have implemented a few ideas into our farm from them. The first two years have been really valuable, and I'm currently enjoying putting together my masters project which looks at weed control in organic rapeseed.



*SRUC delivers sector-leading research, education and consultancy and students on the Organic Farming programme have the benefit of teaching input from all three of these complementary strands, alongside input from other sector experts. Since 2015 this has included a formal teaching partnership with the Organic Research Centre, which further widens the base of expertise feeding into the programme. In addition, we have a long-term organic rotation trial and other relevant field trials located at our Craibstone campus near Aberdeen, which is where the teaching for the programme is based.*



*The programme uses part time online distance learning blended with residential study weekends and study tours, allowing students to gain a PGDip qualification in two years or an MSc in three years, as well as the option to study individual modules.*

*If you are interested in studying Organic Farming with us, please contact Programme Leader Dr Lou Ralph on [lou.ralph@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:lou.ralph@sruc.ac.uk) or visit our website for more information.*

*<http://www.sruc.ac.uk/pgorganicfarming>*