



Farewell but not goodbye to the retiring Roger Hitchings

Roger has worked at ORC for the last fourteen years, first as an OCIS (Organic Conversion Information Service) adviser, then as head of the Organic Advisory Service (OAS) and latterly as Principal Consultant, Information Services. His contribution to the organic farming and particularly the organic horticultural sector has been immense and goes beyond his work at ORC. Phil Sumption pays tribute.

It was an emotional moment on May 15th when Roger Hitchings drove away from Elm Farm and into retirement.

For those of us with a horticultural bent Roger has been 'always there' as a friendly face, a mentor and someone who has steadfastly promoted and defended the interests of organic growers.

His contribution to organic horticulture was recognised recently by the Organic Growers Alliance (OGA) at their AGM.

Presenting Roger with his award "for recognition of all your efforts helping others to grow", pioneering organic grower Tim Deane said: "This award is for someone who's been working away for the good of organic horticulture for years and who, up to now, has received little enough recognition for it. He's a man with a wide grasp of technical matters, particularly of the all-important science of soil, and a great ability to communicate these matters through advisory and educational work. Almost always calm and almost always positive I personally have always found it a pleasure to work with him."

Growers, guitars and hairdressers

Roger's career progressed somewhat erratically from his degree in soil science at Reading University, via British Rail and teaching science to hairdressers at Carmarthen College.

Roger and Susie had moved to Wales in search of 'the good life' and in 1987 the opportunity to set up an educational organic growing project at the college presented itself. Roger, somewhat out of character, pushed himself before the Principal and demanded that the job should be his.

His duties included the conversion of a 4-hectare unit for the production of organic vegetables and the development of training courses. Roger was also active in the growing and marketing of organic produce becoming Chair of the Organic Growers Association in 1990. Under his leadership the Carmarthen unit was a member of Organic Growers West Wales and he was closely involved in the setting up of the Organic Marketing Company.



Roger receives the award from the OGA



This project was ahead of its time and facing difficulties when in 1998 Mark Measures, the then head of OAS, asked Roger to help out with conversion advisory visits in Wales.

Roger became a full-time member of staff at ORC- Elm Farm in 2002 and through the Defra-funded OCIS must have provided advice or information to the majority of organic growers currently active in this country.

The work took him all over England and Wales and some of his colleagues wondered when he ever managed to sleep! Certainly at conferences he would be seen and heard into the early hours entertaining the hardcore with his singing and guitar-playing.

The beat (and the advice) goes on

As well as providing advice to individual growers Roger has also worked on advisory projects for Farming Connect in Wales, Organic Centre Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government. He was a member of the UK Government's Advisory committee on Organic Standards (ACOS); chair of its Technical Committee for the seven years of its existence; a member of the EU Expert Group for Technical Advice in Organic Production (EGTOP); and secretary to the OGA.

Other work has included carrying out of an organic integrity audit for Sainsbury's; working for HDRA-HRI project on the conversion of field scale vegetable production on nine reference farms; a DEFRA-funded organic vegetable market study; and advising the National Botanic Garden of Wales (NBGW) on strategies for the development of the Estate farmland.

Roger will be carrying on as secretary of the OGA for at least another year, thanks to the persuasive powers of Debra Schofield and will also still be involved with ORC as needed on training events. So we at ORC and the UK's organic growers will still be seeing plenty of him. We wish him and Susie well on his retirement.

Other staff comings and goings at ORC

We've not only said goodbye to Roger and to Thomas Döring (see page 21), but also to Louisa Winkler and Helen Pearce at Wakelyns Agroforestry and to Liz Adams. We've welcomed in their place Dr Robbie Girling as Crops and agroforestry research team leader, Tom Hughes as research technician at Wakelyns, Sally Westaway as a researcher primarily on the TWECOM project (see page 24) and Phil Sumption (formerly at Garden Organic) as our Research Communications Officer, and we're just in the process of appointing a new crops researcher at Wakelyns. In future issues, we'll be profiling the new staff (and some not so new) so you can see who is behind the exciting new developments at ORC.