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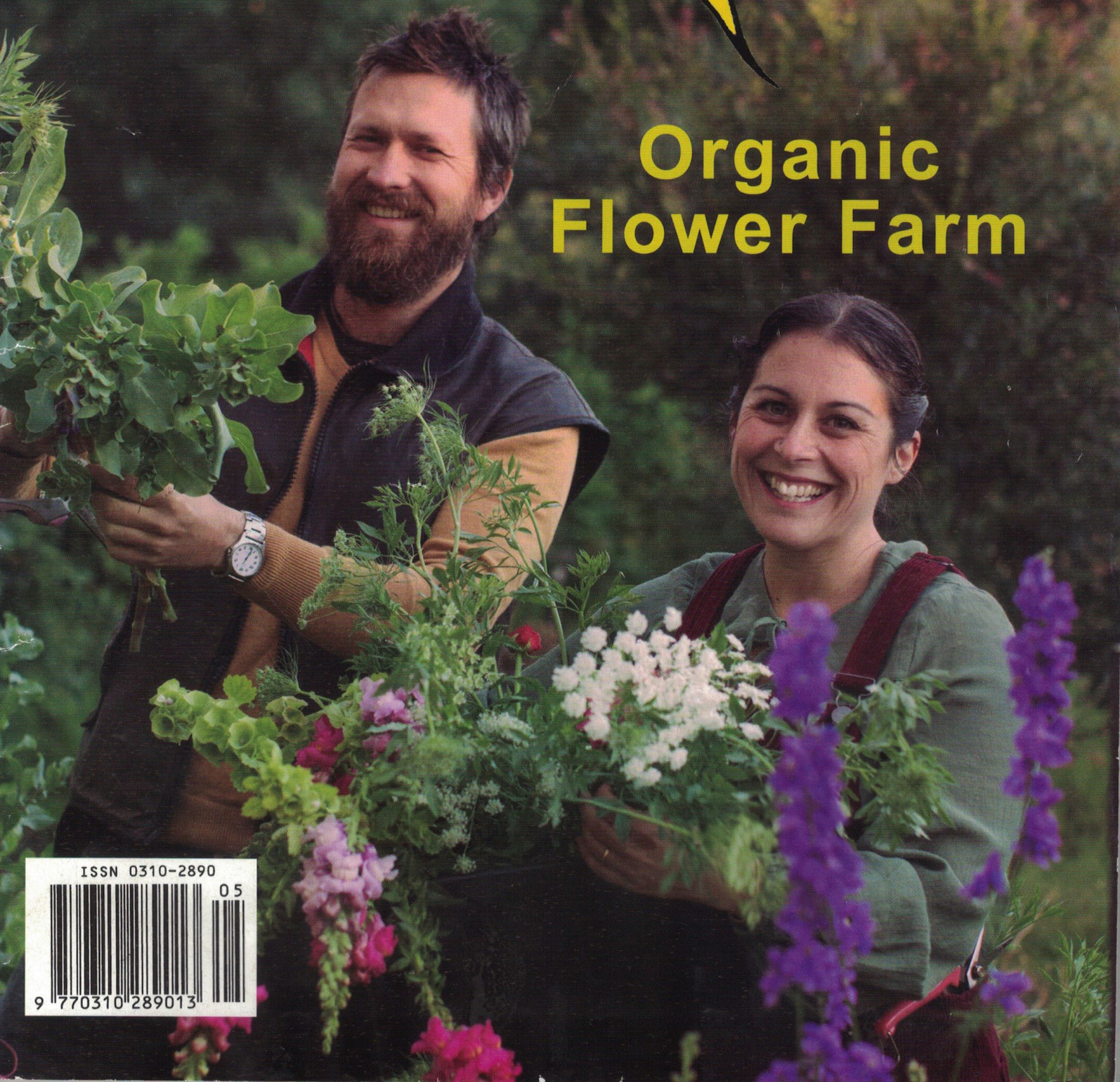
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Organic Flower Farm



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Olive Gap Farm

By Alex Luca, Woodburn, NSW.

Living the dream: Olive Gap is a flower and tea tree farm run on organic principles by two siblings and their families.

At Olive Gap organic farm we produce certified organic cut flowers and tea tree oil on 44 hectares. We also have a small herd of cattle. The farm is managed by two families: Tara, myself and our three children, Olive, April and Cedar; and my sister Tess and her partner Nina. Although we all pitch in to help at different times of the year, Tess and Nina do most of the work on the tea tree and Tara works on flower production. I seem to be the odd job guy around the place and also work part time teaching.

Olive Gap is in the hills that run behind the coast near Woodburn, and was named after an old family who settled in this area.

HISTORY

Tess and I grew up in an intentional community, Korinderie Ridge, which is on the same road as the farm. We've always been gardeners keen on producing our own food. When my wife Tara and I moved back to the area, we moved back onto Korinderie to live. An opportunity then arose to purchase a nearby farm with my sister. A local farmer had been farming the property organically for over 30 years, so we jumped at that opportunity. At the same time, Tara went back to TAFE and completed an organic horticulture course and was keen to get into the flower production, so it all just rolled together fairly well.

I went to a local public school and then went tree planting. I had jobs in the forestry industry planting trees which I thought was pretty cool because you moved around the country from contract to contract. I then flew to New Zealand and did a

season on one of the ski fields working as a lifty. I also crewed on a boat for a few months travelling in the Pacific.

When I returned I started an environmental science degree and joined a Latin band as a drummer and percussionist. Everyone else in it was studying music, so I ended up jumping ship, doing a bachelor of contemporary music, and becoming a professional muso.

Tara and I met at uni – we were both studying music. She played the guitar and wrote songs. When she became pregnant with Olive, I went back to uni and completed a diploma of education and became a teacher for a few years. I still teach two days a week.

We did a lot of travel before our third child, Cedar, was born and we moved back to our roots at Woodburn. A job in the Snowy Mountains in a small apple town called Batlow was interesting because I think it really solidified in us the urge to want to be farmers.

My sister Tess completed a science degree and worked in Wollongong, then with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in Victoria. She lived in Canada with her girlfriend for a few years, and when they parted she returned home. When our grandmother passed away she left us an inheritance that we could use to purchase the farm.

ORGANIC FLOWERS

Tara has been the driver of the flower farm. She's always loved flowers and at her organic horticulture course she realised it could become a viable little business. We started by planning a

few experimental crops which have evolved into our own production and a local flower movement formed with nearby growers.

As the public's awareness of where our flowers come from and what goes into producing them improves, people will start requesting local organic flowers. Often people ask, 'Why would you care if flowers are organic – you don't eat them!' When you inform them of how many chemicals are used in growing a commercial flower and the amount of farmland that gets churned in the process, they often have a change of mind. Also, more than half the flowers on sale in Australia are imported, and they go through massive fumigation leaving the country of origin and coming into our country, as well as all those flower miles and all that plane fuel.

Tara loves cottage garden varieties, so we started with tried and true stock like roses, cosmos, zinnias, dahlias, scabiosa and Queen Anne's lace. We are interested in native species so have been experimenting with local ones. Some are absolutely beautiful and there's a huge market for them.

We have a mix of annuals and perennials – obviously there is much less work with the perennials once they're established. At the same time, we're only interested in supplying a few boutique florists and outlets with our flowers, as well as growing specific varieties for weddings. Bridal couples tell us what they want and we grow the flowers for their wedding and they know where they've come from. This is a much richer experience for everyone.

The flower farm is at Korinderie



and has infertile sandy coastal soil so we use a lot of organic matter, rock dust, and organic pelleted fertiliser, but mainly compost.

BUGS

We haven't had too many pests on our property. There was one random leatherleaf slug episode; the culprit must have come in on some plant material. They look like a tropical slug and love to congregate in the compost on old orange peelings. They also love beer, so we poured out homebrew into little trays, put them around the garden, and then picked the slugs up manually.

We use Dipel for grasshoppers and butterflies, and eco-oil (organic white oil) for aphids and scale. Mainly we try to keep the pH of our soil at 6.5 because if you have that right, nutrients are available and plants will grow though small insect attacks and an insect infestation doesn't become a problem.

PRODUCTION

In a small flower production system, succession is the key – knowing what to plant next. We've learned how to read the crops better so we know when to plant the next one. We've learned what slows crops down and what pushes them along; a collection of all the normal

factors you read about in books, but the interactions only make sense once you are farming. They include temperature, moisture, soil moisture, soil temperature, big rain events, daylight and length of days.

It's a good idea to write everything down in a diary so you can learn from your mistakes; that's how you learn the best.

We started with a simple hand-drawn grid of our planting of different varieties but now use a spreadsheet. We create a new one each year and save the old ones as a reference which is vital for knowing when to sow seed in the greenhouse, plant out, etc.

EQUIPMENT

We use a small Kubota tractor with a few implements, otherwise the work is manual, and we often use a broad fork. The tractor is used to plough the green manure in and form up the beds so succession planting is quicker and on time. Ploughing the crop back in also keeps the nutrients in place, important when you have bought in fertiliser to start the bed off well.

TEA TREE OIL

Unlike the flowers, which were a passion and a conscious decision, 3.5 hectares of tea tree had been

planted on the farm 30 years ago. We decided to utilise it and found we were starting production at just the right time. The tea tree industry has gone through some tough times, but is currently booming. Since tea tree is well suited to our area, we have had the confidence to extend the planting to about 7 hectares.

There are many different species of melaleuca but the tea tree that produces the well-known Australian tea tree oil is *Melaleuca alternifolia* – just one species. The industry has been breeding *Melaleuca alternifolia* for almost 40 years, and new improved selections of the species now have increased oil content.

The conventional density of tea tree plants is about 30,000 trees to the acre, so farms plant in one metre wide rows with 30cm spacing between the trees. We don't use irrigation and have never had a pest problem.

Soil preparation must include a good deep rip to help the plant roots get down to moisture and survive. Establishment is the challenge for organic plantings as grass grows quickly and competes with the trees. Hoeing the weeds prior to planting is helpful, and so is the little Kubota as it fits our row spacing. We also have a small rotary hoe which helps with mulching because we put all the mulch from our harvest back onto our land. We use rock dust and lime to bring the low pH5.5 to above 6.

We are developing a small herd of cattle that we move into the plantation at different times once the trees are established. They don't like eating tea tree but love to eat the grass – literally all the way around the trunk. So we have weed management and fertiliser at no cost to us.

HARVEST

The tea tree is harvested when dormant in winter. It's not when the oil content is highest, but it then has a full growing season and develops more biomass, which compensates for the small loss in oil content. We get about 350kg of plant material



per hectare on the new block and about half that on the original planting, and the oil yield is about 1%.

We use a tractor driven flail harvester which has spinning blades that chop the plant off at 10cm; it then goes through the chipper and is blown into our stainless steel mobile bin which is driven to the boiler. Steam is passed through the plant mass liberating the essential oils and the mixture collects at the top where there is an exit pipe that goes to a condenser. The condenser uses cold water to cool the steam/oil mixture so when it cools back to become a liquid, the oil floats on the water and can be easily removed.

The extraction takes four hours per bin and what is left is spread back on the plantation as mulch.

MARKETING

Prior to this year we were wholesaling the oil to overseas companies, but have now launched our website to sell online in Australia. Our oil is certified organic in Australia and the USA. It should prove to be popular in Australia as it has so many uses. Studies have shown it has antibiotic and antimicrobial properties and there is a trial running in the Northern Territory using it to treat scabies. It is used topically for health, plus people find it handy for

disinfecting the kitchen, cleaning the fridge and even for taking labels off bottles, and it has a lovely smell.

KIDS ON THE FARM

We moved back home because Olive had to decide on a school, but in the end we opted for homeschooling. Olive is now 13 years old, April is 11 and Cedar is 8. We chose homeschooling because of distance. Korinderie Community Farm has other homeschooled kids, so we have lots of joint activities, but we do our own schooling with the kids in the morning at home.

We've found that the girls really like school fitting in with their daily routine. At a normal school kids have to fit in with everyone else's daily life, not life on a farm. One of the joys of homeschooling is if you wake up one morning and everyone in the family has the enthusiasm to complete a particular project, you can just go and do it.

As parents we are often asked about socialisation, 'Don't they need more friends and don't they need people of their own age?' When they've met our children, the first comment is always they're just so open and well spoken and get along with people from all ages. As a teacher myself, I think you don't need to sit in a classroom with 30

other kids of the same age to learn social skills, and there is no bullying.

The girls love homeschooling. They love feeding the cows and helping us in the garden, they're all big gardeners, looking after their own beds as well as helping with the flower beds when needed. Of course, as with any kids, some days are better than others.

Olive has just started year seven at home and is loving it. She has stepped up her music and was recently in the Regional Youth Orchestra at Canberra playing violin with people from all over NSW.

PHILOSOPHY

I guess I should mention that we have a strong stewardship ethos. We all really want to look after this farm and leave it in a better condition than we found it. We have close connections with the local Indigenous people as I've worked with them for the last 10 years. Having chosen farming it is obvious that we're not out to make millions, but we really want to have a sustainable business that will allow us to express the values that we have in life.

More information at website: www.olivegapfarm.com.au or on Facebook and Instagram: @olivegapfarm.