



Case Study: TaylorGrown, Perthshire, Scotland



TaylorGrown is typical of many contemporary start-up businesses, a small capital base, entering an expanding market, with some strong ideas about how it can grow and a social media profile, it is just that this model of business is not seen very often in agriculture. TaylorGrown growing organic vegetables, owns no land, it receives no subsidy, and its general manager Joe Rolfe is not shy about telling people this:

“I like to think we are constantly pushing the boundaries as we strive to become completely sustainable from a business point of view as well as environmental. We’re just as innovative as non-organic farmers – if not more so because we have to be.”

Founded in 2005 in Perthshire, TaylorGrown was bought 10 years later by Produce World. This has enabled it to make longer-term investments and it now supplies some of the largest multiple retailers with organic carrots, potatoes and onions.

“We are producing about 4500 packed tonnes of carrots, about 500 tonnes of onions and potatoes are a new venture this year – and those are supplied via Produce World through a dedicated organic supply chain to the supermarkets.”

An innovative approach

TaylorGrown works with four landlords, all of whom are organic. The largest and where they are based, is Houghton Hall with 600 hectares of arable and grazing land. Some of the enterprises on the estate are managed in-house such as the livestock and cereals, whereas others such as the vegetable production are taken in hand by other companies such as TaylorGrown, “we fit into their rotation, and we are in a long-term relationship”. This innovative approach to field-scale vegetable production places relationships at the centre of the business model, from landlord through to customers. Joe Rolfe says:

“I quite often tell people when talking about the farm, for me, it is the ultimate form of farming, all of the enterprises are complementary of one another. We benefit from the fertility building due to the grass and livestock and as dedicated contractors working on the cereal production for the estate we benefit on the weed control which as a business is our biggest cost.”

Understanding the needs of all of those involved requires a focus on details. Customers look for innovation in vegetable products but landlords seek an assurance that you share the same ethos about land management.

Sustainable farming systems

TaylorGrown is LEAF Marque certified as it was a request from customers, although they are using the Marque more widely:

“We do some secondary sales into London, and we put the LEAF Marque onto the packaging, and I would like to think that makes a difference, that there is some brand recognition.”

As an organic farmer, Joe feels that LEAF Marque is complementary to their overall approach:

“While LEAF isn’t specifically aimed at organic systems; I think that organic farms fit into the LEAF mantra perfectly as we are sustainable farming systems, so everything that is required to be LEAF Marque is our base level.”

There are gains to be made from the scheme but that “if you are going to do it properly and be true to yourself” it has got to be more than a tick box exercise and “that every action needs to be thought about thoroughly”. With a plethora of accreditation schemes, “80% of all them are the same, LEAF to be fair is the more outside of that, a 60/40 balance” and there is considerable value in those extra questions.

Attention to detail

As part of that careful consideration TaylorGrown has focused on improving efficiency around fossil fuels, “it makes you think more about those specific aspects, which is only a good thing, we are maybe guilty of getting big diesel guzzling tractors.” One area that TaylorGrown has focused on is the movement of equipment:

“Things that you would think what has that got to do with LEAF? But when you work out how much diesel you use moving heavy implements from the farm yard to the field and moving them back and forth, we now take them off and leave them in the field. Just coming back to the yard with the tractor, you take the parts and tools with you to the field. That doesn’t sound like it has anything to do with LEAF, but they all have an impact, not only on the environment but also your costs and time, you know that is more efficient.”

This attention to detail is being carried over to the soil, “we soil sample every field, every year” and soil health is a priority. Already this focus on the soil and building its qualities has had noticeable effects:

“Visiting agronomists have commented on how the carrots crops, in particular, have withstood the dry months and the wet months better than their conventional counterparts; I’m quite sure that is down to our soil organic matter and soil health.”

Joe is a keen user of social media, and as a Waitrose demonstration farm has a YouTube video of Alan Titchmarsh visiting the farm, as well as drone and GoPro footage of farming operations. For Joe, this extends the reach of TaylorGrown, and:

“I think it gives everybody a feel-good factor, there is a lot of negativity out there I don’t use social media in that way, I try to give people a snapshot of the innovation and forward thinking things that are being done in organic systems.”