

# **BBC RADIO 4 'ON YOUR FARM'**

## **BROADCAST 15 FEBRUARY 2004**

### **A VISIT TO TOLHURST ORGANIC MARKET GARDEN, BERKSHIRE**

This is an edited and somewhat paraphrased version of the broadcast. How can a written transcript fully convey the impact of these on-site recordings or put over the obvious enthusiasm, knowledge, dedication and sheer joy demonstrated by Tolly and his friends? Well, it can't but I have tried to give at least some impression of the programme, which was presented by Anna Hill. By the way, 'stockless' is the usual agricultural term for a farm having no animals, 'stockfree' is the term used by Vegan-Organic Trust and by Tolly here, as a more positive term to describe a holding where no animals are kept for commercial gain and where no manures or other animal by-products are used as inputs into the growing system - Peter

**The broadcast opened at the end of the growing cycle, with customers collecting their vegetable boxes from local distributors and describing the distribution scheme.**

Anna explained how Iain Tolhurst (Tolly) took over a dilapidated 2-acre walled garden with 16 acres of field scale production in 1987 and transformed it into a thriving market garden. But this is no ordinary place – it is what is known as stockless, there are no animals and no animal manures or by-products are used at all.

Tolly explained that market gardens have traditionally been dependent on manures, but that on his holding this tradition has been broken so that instead of bringing in fertility there is a relatively closed system. The walled garden is partly bounded by a traditional flint wall, which is over 300 years old, partly by an old 'moat' now used as a conservation area and partly by trees. It is on a steep slope and the whole site has varying microclimates, which can make for some very late frosts. Much use is made of polytunnels. Tolly went on to say that the soil is a very important element and great care is taken of it, particularly its biological content such as the earthworms and other soil fauna.

Crop rotations are all-important to a stockfree system and the methods used were outlined, with a 7 year rotation for the field scale vegetables and a 9 year intensive vegetable rotation in the market garden (*an article fully describing these rotations can be emailed on request – Peter*). The use of green manures is also a key element and a green manure is any plant – especially legumes - that is used for fertility rather than being grown as a crop.

**Anna – why legumes?**

**Tolly** – these plants take the abundant nitrogen from the air and via the soil bacteria recycle it so that it can be used as a source of fertility, however the green manures must be carefully managed in order to do this!

**Anna – doesn't such a system require a lot of land to be tied up rather than growing crops?**

**Tolly** – we are prepared to accept that some land has to be devoted to growing the green manures. Perhaps from the economists point of view this would not seem efficient but we have been doing this for a very long time and we actually started with a conventional animal manure system, so we have a fairly good idea of what the economics are. If we were to try to keep livestock the cost of the husbandry would in fact be uneconomic. So it is cheaper for us not to have animals, and a lot of farmers are in the same position these days, why not

just use green manures instead? The economic argument against stockfree just doesn't stack up any longer.

**Anna – surely these methods could not be applied to, for example, cereals?**

**Tolly** – we would not grow cereals on this site, it's too small, but there are many examples of stockfree cereal growing. ADAS Turrington ran trials for many years and the economics were very good, the fertility cycle was very strong. There are no practical or economic reasons why stockfree cannot be done on a bigger scale, providing there is a proper price, which organic does attract, we are not talking about premiums, just a reasonable price. There is no reason why say a 1000 arable acre farm cannot be growing stockfree organic arable crops using rotations and green manures and given the fact that livestock loses so much money they would be better off doing that.

**Anna – are you saying that farmers are too greedy, trying to get too much out of their land?**

**Tolly** – no, I don't think farmers are greedy, they are just trying desperately to stay in business. The countryside is losing people at a fantastic rate, anything that brings more people back on the land is good and stockfree organic does have a slightly higher labour element. We also need to get back to local food distribution; this has started now and will snowball in the future.

**Anna – so how did you start your organic box scheme?**

**Tolly** – we started very small and informally just by talking to people and a system of neighbourhood reps was established who look after local distribution, now there are 31 local reps who look after their local customers. We try to encourage people to walk to collect the boxes, rather than use cars, this means customers have to make a little effort themselves and so appreciate that food just doesn't turn up on the doorstep! It's a neighbourly scheme and actually gives some more social value to peoples lives.

Tollys views, plus the value, taste and freshness of the vegetables, were endorsed in interviews with some of the customers.

Returning to the market garden, two of the staff were interviewed at the potato store where straw bales protect the spuds. Chris and JJ spoke of their enthusiasm for the work. They explained how positive it was to see how the environment was protected, how wildlife was encouraged through beetle banks, hedgerows and varying tree plantings. A key comment was that the work is about practical environmentalism, beyond just protests and ideas, and just being here is a pleasure!

**Anna – what do you both think about stockless systems?**

Coming from a conservationists viewpoint, its about being wildlife friendly, through the rich eco-system, lack of pesticides and so forth. Stockless is also completely relevant as it is a closed system not taking anything away from the land, its an efficient system.

**Anna – and I suppose you two are the most efficient things on the farm?**

Oh yes!

Back to Tolly again

**Anna – you are interested in *local* food, so how big do you want to get?**

**Tolly** – well, that's a good question, which we have often pondered; getting too big would not be a good idea – personal involvement would be lost and I enjoy the practical growing side too much. Up to about 500 weekly boxes is about right for us, so long as the distribution system is in place.

**Anna – it looks like you have sustainability in practise here**

**Tolly** – we hope so, it is very difficult to measure sustainability in its various forms but we know that we are pretty near to soil sustainability, we are not losing the essential nutrients, these are steadily improving, as far as we know at the moment we can maintain fertility indefinitely within our closed system.

**Anna - you could do this in your back garden couldn't you?**

**Tolly** – yes, you certainly could, lots of people do so and we are very happy to see that but many do not have the necessary time.

**Anna – and you are all about delivering a personal service?**

**Tolly** – Yes, we like people to be able to identify our produce with our farm. We have farm walks here, visitors from all over the world, overseas students come bringing welcome ideas and all this is an important social element for us.

**Anna – why isn't everyone using your system, is it too much like hard work?**

**Tolly** – stockfree has been done successfully in many countries for centuries, look at China for example and it does work on any scale, but as with many things it has never been done here before. People do like to see it happening and we help to inform them. We hope it is going to increase. There is a movement now, there is the Vegan-Organic Trust which is very active in promoting stockfree farming, there is also a new set of standards which they are about to launch in the next few months under the wing of the Soil Association. These standards will be a world leader. There has never been a set of stockfree organic standards anywhere in the world so Britain is leading the way. We have to start thinking about better use of the land and even conventional farmers could benefit a lot from for example increased use of green manures.

**The programme ended on this affirmative note**

## After this programme what next?

All in all a very positive message that Vegan-Organic Trust will build upon,.....next we hope to feature stockfree in the Archers!.....well, Tolly used to advise the producers of the Archers when organic farming was first featured on the programme!

Vegan-Organic Trust is an educational and research charity that exists to promote stockfree organic growing. If you are not already a supporter of Vegan-Organic Trust please do unite with us in helping to show the world how stockfree growing will benefit people, animals and the environment.

Details of how to become a supporter are on the website [www.veganorganic.net](http://www.veganorganic.net)  
Or by post from Patrick Browne (VOT), 161 Hamilton Road, Longsight, Manchester  
M13 0PQ

Information about stockfree methods and how they can be applied on farms, allotments and gardens is featured on the website, along with other information and links to other sources.

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