

# vital veg

**olive** meets Wendy Seel, a finalist in the 2008 BBC Radio 4 Food & Farming Awards for her Aberdeenshire organic veg box business

Words EMILY KERRIGAN Photograph MARTIN HUNTER

**'I spent 14 years researching how plants grow.**

My business partner Anne and I were both plant physiologists so we already had the theory.

We started growing organic veg to eat at home and it was packed with flavour – completely different from anything we'd eaten before. We knew there was a gap in the market locally and when the farm (at North Tillydaff) came up for sale, it was too tempting to turn down.

**'Starting out was tough.** It wasn't just about swapping our textbooks for trowels. We also had to learn commercial vegetable growing, retailing and logistics, all at once. Our farming neighbours were a godsend. They lent us tractors, helped mend fences and offered unlimited moral support.

**'From the outset, it was organic or nothing.**

It's the closest thing we have at the moment to a sustainable food production system. The first research proving the link between healthy soil, healthy plants and healthy people was carried out as long ago as the 1920s. It's all about working with nature, not against it.

**'Vital Veg is resolutely small-scale.** We deliver about 130 boxes a week, all within a 20-mile radius and our nine staff all live locally. Anne specialises in tomatoes and finances, I'm in charge of cropping and customers.

**'Our target is 24 hours from field to fork.** The veg are harvested, packed and delivered. Because everything's local, there's no need to refrigerate, which means a smaller carbon footprint.

**'Veg growing is one big jigsaw puzzle.** You start out with a wish-list but then other factors come into play. We're in north-east Scotland so the weather can be tough and the soil poor. Plus organic rules govern what you can and can't grow – you have to rotate crops, for example. There's a lot of planning.

**'Our boxes have to make real meals.** We don't just hand out boxes and boxes of swede and nothing else – we want our customers to be able to cook proper, varied meals, without waste. This month is great for radishes, spring onions and a variety of salad leaves – rocket, mizuna and chard. And with a bit of luck and sunshine, we'll be seeing the first of our heritage tomatoes soon.



**'The greenhouse is my favourite place.** It's full of promise. I'm always up early and straight in there to check on my seeds. After breakfast I head out to the fields to sow, harvest and weed. Of course, the weather always gets in the way.

**'I've shed tears over failed crops.** We've had disastrous summers. It's costly and disappointing but you learn from it. Nothing beats glowing feedback from customers. And we've won awards – the BBC one and a Green Butterfly Award from the Aberdeenshire Environmental Forum.

**'I want students to pick up their spades.** The average British farmer is 60 years old and chasing subsidies to survive. I don't blame youngsters for not wanting to get involved. It's a starved industry, wedded to oil through fertilisers and transportation, and there's a lack of research into sustainable food production. If we could only make horticulture a viable career choice, we'd see more students coming through. We're going to need them when the oil runs out and we can't fly in food from overseas.'

## HOW ETHICAL IS VITAL VEG?

**ORGANIC YES** 100% certified organic since 2005 and Soil Association accredited.

**FOOD MILES LOW** All veg grown on the farm is sold within a 20-mile radius. Vital Veg uses no refrigeration, minimising the time between harvest and delivery, which significantly reduces its carbon footprint. Packaging is also kept to a minimum.

**FOOD WASTE LOW** Any gluts are sold wholesale and regular customers are given the option of donating their box to a local charity if they go on holiday.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Vital Veg, North Tillydaff, Midmar, Inverurie, Aberdeenshire. 01330 833 823; [vitalveg.co.uk](http://vitalveg.co.uk)

● FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE RADIO 4 FOOD & FARMING AWARDS AT [BBC.CO.UK/RADIO4/FACTUAL/FOODAWARDS2008.SHTML](http://BBC.CO.UK/RADIO4/FACTUAL/FOODAWARDS2008.SHTML)