

# Reaping

## the rewards of organic growth

Greenheart Organic Farms founder Elena Kinane digs into the secrets behind organic farming in the UAE

By Eleanor Dickinson

Growing food organically in the Middle Eastern desert sand may seem as fruitful an endeavour as trying to grow it on the moon.

Though scientific advancements in agriculture have paved the way for a small, burgeoning farming industry in the United Arab Emirates, the dream of buying local food grown entirely without chemical intervention seems like little more than a pleasant fantasy.

But against these odds, Elena Kinane became one of the first organic food farmers in the country nearly 10 years ago. She is now the co-owner of Greenheart UAE, a thriving business that has grown from sending vegetable boxes to a few families in Dubai's Arabian Ranches, to supplying some of the UAE's most high-end restaurants.

Run in unison with her business partner Azzam Mubarak, the food delivery service now receives more than 350 household orders per week, and their small shop on the edge of Al Barsha has flourished over the last year.

Greenheart's success dispels any enduring myths that organic farming is impossible and unproductive even in the harshest conditions. However, Kinane is the first to admit her endeavours



**PEOPLE USED TO GET QUITE ANGRY WHEN WE'D TELL THEM WE DIDN'T HAVE WHAT THEY WANTED IN BECAUSE THE CHICKS WERE HATCHING FOR EXAMPLE. BUT TO BE ABLE TO SAY TO PEOPLE 'WE DON'T HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU' WHEN THERE'S ORDERS COMING IN IS QUITE SOMETHING.**

have only endured thanks to an endless supply of patience and an iron-will to grow produce without even a hint of artificial intervention.

"Organic food for me means it is 100 per cent chemical-free," she explains.

"It is food that is grown in well-balanced soil. There is an exchange that sees the crops not only take nutrients from the soil, but give them back in return. And for me organic means it's nutritious and has contributed to the earth not taken away



from it. You want the soil to be better after 20 years, not worse; you are the guardian of that land."

Bavarian-born Kinane is one of just a handful of commercial organic farmers in the UAE, though there are hundreds of farmers producing crops for private consumption. She now has three farms – a large one in Sharjah and two smaller plots in Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah. Across the land Kinane grows 143 varieties of fruits and vegetables, and some days she harvests more than two tonnes worth of produce.

All this seems incredible given the land conditions upon which the crops are harvested – plus the fact Kinane's prior farming experience was growing plants on her balcony.

"It's all self-taught," she says. "It comes from a lot of research and testing. But it's all self-taught from the desert and I wouldn't know how to do this in Europe, and I wouldn't have any knowledge about farming with chemicals. But with organic farming it's just like gardening in your back garden and taking it on a larger scale."

Crucial to the farm's productivity is the soil, which Kinane has spent years painstakingly building from scratch out of goat and chicken manure, with compost from her own crops gradually added to the mix over the years.

Naturally, the water is equally – if not more – precious to the operation. Drawn from underground supplies, the water usage is carefully regulated to sustain supplies – a major limitation of any quick or sudden expansion. Other tricks used include crop rotation, while inter-planting crops with 'companion' plants prevents the need for pesticides.

As Kinane explains: "If pests see acres of something they like, of course they will come back. So pesticides are used. Then the insects become immune so the pesticides have to be made stronger."

However, there are limitations to what



can be grown in the UAE, which is why Kinane also imports some items from a friend's farm in Lebanon and a number of small, carefully chosen farms in Sri Lanka.

As well as fruit and vegetables, Greenheart also produces eggs, though none at the time of our interview it seems: "The chicks are hatching," says Kinane.

She adds: "We have a stock system, which we abide by; if we know we have 50 kilos of something, we can't just go and sell 100. It's just not possible. We don't have much kale in at the moment so unless you order it ahead you won't get it."

"People used to get quite angry when we'd tell them we didn't have what they wanted in because the chicks were hatching for example. But to be able to say to people 'we don't have something for you' when there's orders coming in is quite something."

"Some [other organic suppliers] will just add to the orders from outside sources to make the numbers up. But with us the stock system is something we're very strict about it."

Such discipline to only using her own

produce, either grown or imported, hasn't made the journey easy for Kinane. In her early years of farming her yields were so small that on some produce she would end up making a loss.

While the sedate pace in growth did little to deter her, it was enough to mark the end of her first venture – a short-lived organic shop in Dubai called Al Nazwa – after her impatient local partner decided to withdraw from the enterprise in 2010.

Though the closure was a painful setback, the experience proved an important learning curve when it came to starting with Greenheart.

"Al Nazwa was very successful, but unfortunately we hadn't figured out the retail thing and it wasn't making enough money initially to finance all the operation costs," she explains.

"Our outgoings were quite expensive. The shop we had was in Al Manara. We had a huge rent and to cover a rent of that space with just organic produce was just not doable. We hadn't planned how to finance the project for the long term – we just didn't

have the experience, so my local business partner pulled out."

"When I started again with Greenheart, it was just me and my engineer partner [Mubarak]. We decided early on to focus on the corporates because with corporate clients it's a lot easier to see what they need and harvest a lot quicker. And that was the focus we had from the start - not just to rely on passing trade. So it helped us because it gave us an idea of how much to grow and of what."

The 'corporate side', as Kinane describes it, now accounts for the bulk of the overall business revenue. Freedom Pizza, one of the first major outlets to sign up, remains a loyal customer, as does Nobu at The Atlantis, plus many more high-end establishments at some of the UAE's top hotels including The Fairmont and The Four Seasons. In total Greenheart now supplies ingredients to 45 different F&B establishments.

Footfall to the Al Barsha shop is growing steadily as evidenced by the ever-increasing opening hours, extending from just three days a week to six last year. But to entice customers to travel to the quiet location near Arabian Ranches, Kinane admits she had to ruffle her feathers a bit and sell other items alongside her own sourced produce. These are all "hand-picked" and largely follow the same organic, healthy vein, with everything from virgin coconut oil, organic porridge and ethically sourced soap sold alongside the lemon cucumbers and cherry tomatoes.

The third revenue stream - online ordering - also continues to thrive as seen not through the number of orders, but the volume of purchases, according to Kinane.

"We get people who buy 20 types of grocery items with us - eggs, dairy and then all the vegetables," she explains. Our average bill used to be about Dhs200 and now it's more like Dhs600 - that's the average.

"Some people even have Dhs2,000 bills; people who cook every meal. And that's what we're looking for. If we get an order for just Dhs100 it doesn't make much sense to us because once you have done all the administration, you're not

making much back. We're looking for customers that do their whole shop with us. I understand that for some people such a bill is not feasible, but ideally for us it's the biggest orders that make the money."

Kinane hopes to boost this area by improving the look of Greenheart's website - "we want to get rid of the 80s look," she says - and by also increasing the variety of products available, including meat and dairy.

However, she admits that if online orders were to suddenly "triple overnight," the business would not be able to cope due to the strict stock system and the limited yields of each product. It is those fears that have so far prevented Kinane from embarking on any major expansion endeavours.

"We have been talking to investors about expanding," she says. "But many of those who have a genuine interest want to move too fast. Over the last five years it has been a very gradual process and a step-by-step process. So even if we got an investor, expansion would not be an overnight process. We have more space on our land, but we can only take so much water from the wells. You can't abuse them."

Future expansion is not only reliant on a credible and genuine investor stepping up, but on the consumers

themselves. Though Greenheart currently enjoys a loyal customer following, Kinane admits the majority of people are unimpressed by the price difference between standard produce and their organic counterparts.

The rise of the so-called wellness industry may have promoted the health benefits of organic food, but on the other hand it has made a large portion of the population "cynical" towards it, she admits.

At the same time, with the effects of low oil prices hitting UAE families already beleaguered by rent and education costs, is it any surprise if they choose to save money on their food bills?

Kinane, however, disagrees, arguing that good, nutritious food - and, as a result, overall health - is the last thing people should cut back on.

"The attitude of the consumer needs to change," she says.

"We want to spend money on clothes, holidays, handbags and luxury goods. The price of food is too low and there's too much waste, but if you were to change all of that then you could grow more.

"With a healthy field and an educated farmer, you could grow so much more than with a conventional farm. And your body needs less food if you give it nutritious food. The idea that we need chemicals to feed the world is nonsense."

