

NST, 11 Nov. 2008: Many organic fans but too few farmers

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People are getting more health conscious, learning more about organic food and demand is on the rise, say suppliers.

Charting an eight to 10 per cent rise in demand for organic fruits and vegetables every month, supplier Kerby Ho of KK Horganik now talks about the difficulties filling orders.

"Because of the recent rainy spell, there's been a shortage and everyone's finding it a little tough to produce enough.

"But if the weather stays sunny for the next few weeks, there should be enough supply."

Organic-certified wholesaler Radiant Code is seeing double-digit growth, says its manager Loke Siew Foong.

She said consumers were becoming more health conscious and moving away from what they viewed as adulterated food.

Radiant Code, which deals mostly in ready-to-eat and use organic products, sees this growth in sales across its wide range of products.

And like other suppliers, it has ventured into using the ingredients they import to make other goods.

Herbs are used in soaps and personal care items and grains and nuts mixed into ready-to-eat snacks.

The recent melamine scare gave a small boost to the sales of some organic food items like milk.

Albert Chew of Country Farm said there was an increase in enquiries from customers about dairy products in the past few months.

Country Farm supplied customers with lab test reports and the sales of milk consequently increased.

Despite the demand, much still needs to be done to forge organic farming into the mainstream of agriculture, says Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute's senior principal research officer Dr A. Sivapragasam.

Though the area under organic cultivation has grown over the years, it is still small.

In 2001, there were around 27 organic producers in the country with farms covering 131ha.

Today, according to Mardi, there are about 1,000ha of registered and 2,800ha unregistered organic farms.

The volume produced is low, says Sivapragasam, who is also deputy director of Mardi's Research Centre for Rice and Industrial Crops.

A major hypermarket chain here that sees a year-on-year growth of 20 per cent in the sales of organic products is constantly searching for growers to meet its growing demands.

So the domestic market's needs are often supported by imports.

Mardi's research shows that almost 80 per cent of the market's needs are met by imports -- organic fruits from Australia and New Zealand, beans and condiments from China, and processed products from the US, Europe and Thailand.

While the distribution and marketing systems are in place and the standards for the production, processing and marketing of organic produce have been set, this is still a niche market here.

A novelty here is that the market is worth RM79 billion in the US, RM36 billion in Western Europe and RM1.4 billion in Asia, according to figures released by the Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Ministry last year.

What organic farming needs, says Sivapragasam, is more support, planning and making use of opportunities.

Conventional farming has the benefit of years of research and development, infrastructure and financial aid.

Organic farmers need even more help with simple things like choosing the right crop for the soil.

They don't have the option of pumping the soil with fertilisers, Sivapragasam points out.

Malaysia is also yet to make headway in areas like organic animal production, processed foods, biofertilisers or organic cosmetics.

Malaysia has to be part of the big scheme of things as there exist opportunities in the organic sector.

For instance, Malaysia has a large rural population of farmers who could be involved in this sector to elevate their socio-economic position.

Work also has to be done to make Malaysia's organic food certification scheme more affordable and globally acceptable.

Many of these challenges and issues will be discussed at next week's National Conference on Organic Agriculture.

Organised by Mardi and the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry, the conference and exhibition begins on Tuesday.

For information, visit www.mardi.my/main.php