

Dairy farming using organic principles

by Margie Frayne

In all organic farming the farmer focuses his attention on the soil. Healthy soil produces healthy plants, which provide healthy food for humans and animals.

A good organic dairy farmer's first concern is the continual supply of good grazing for the cows, in summer and winter. It is up to the farmer to manage the grazing.

He should divide the grazing area into fenced off camps – at least four, preferably more. The cows should be moved from one camp to the next every month. This gives the grass time to rest and grow again, so that in three months time there is lots of new grass for the cows again. It also prevents soil erosion.

After the cows have left a camp, the farmer should feed the soil. The manure left behind by the cows is a good start, and it is all in the right place. An organic farmer can spray or sprinkle liquid fertilisers such as Seagro (liquid seaweed fertiliser) and soil conditioners like EM (Effective Microorganisms) over the camp.

Before the rainy season, the farmer should sprinkle good grass seeds over all the camps to introduce better pastures. These seeds can be bought from the nearest farmer's co-op. Look for Smuts Fingergrass, Eragrostis, teff, or ryegrass or other cover crops that they recommend, such as vetch and clover. This will improve the diet of the cows and they will produce more milk, and will also provide a thicker cover of grazing over the soil.

By providing controlled grazing camps, the cow does not need to walk far to find enough food. Therefore it does not waste much energy, and the food it eats is used to produce more milk, rather than for walking. This is more profitable for the farmer.

A good organic dairy farmer can improve the grazing and the health of his cows and the quantity of the milk he gets from them, just by taking care of his soil first. **UM**