

Liz Clay, organic vegetables, Neerim South

Soil, its fertility, its vulnerability, its wealth, its husbandry, is fundamental to all agricultural aspects in intensive horticulture. This is deeply understood by those who work the land taking crops, growing food to nourish.

I am the daughter of third-generation market gardeners Freddie and Joyce Clay, who grew up on the rich sandy loams of the sand-belt country, now a part of Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs.

Early recollections are of following Freddie down the paddocks, he in his gumboots, I in mine, trotting to keep up with his giant steps. Him explaining to me the state of the crops - why these carrots weren't responding as well as others due to sprinklers not reaching or where the cabbages were a little smaller because the fertiliser had run out.

I was learning but not really understanding; just knowing that this was important in some way. Then one time he stopped, dropped to his knees and pushed his fingers into the freshly ploughed soil and emerged with cupped hands of sweet-smelling soil offering it to me: "You could eat this stuff."

I didn't really get it then, but years later as an organic farmer I do get it. The soil, sweet, rich, fecund, busy with life itself is the basis of our life. The good earth that, when nurtured, respected and loved, nourishes us all, daily.

It is this soil and the way we manage it that defines organic farming. The knowledge and belief that from a healthy soil grows healthy plants that in turn determines the health of animals and people.

I have been producing certified organic vegetables for more than 20 years now and have seen the sustained growth of the organic market place as more and more people appreciate the benefits of organic. And, as I scratch around in the soil, preparing the good earth to nourish, I am delighted to the core that over generations I continue the role in connecting people to the soil.