



The biodegradable packaging for Ladybird Organics' salad mixes has proved to be a hit with consumers.

Calculated risk pays dividends

For Steve Skopilianos, Director of Melbourne's Ladybird Organics, the rebranding his company after switching to organic farming has brought commercial success, writes Youna Angevin-Castro.



Over the past four years, Steve Skopilianos has converted each of his nine properties, totaling 100 acres, to organic production. In the process he has cemented his position as one of the country's leading organic vegetable producers.

"It's definitely been a positive move for us. In conventional farming circles, we were a very small fish in a large pond. Now, in organic circles, we're a large

fish in a small pond—it gives us a point of difference," he said.

Early bird

An early adopter of the EnviroVeg program, Steve credits the program with setting his wheels in motion towards more sustainable farming practices when, in the late-1990s, he realised that his growing practices weren't working.

"We were spending more and

more money on chemicals. When EnviroVeg was launched, we were one of the first 10 growers on board, and it certainly got us thinking about being more sustainable in our approach to vegetable production," said Steve.

In 2005, Steve commenced the conversion process, and in a relatively short time has become a leading example of how organic production can be commercially viable. Now, Ladybird Organics

grows lettuce, pumpkins, sugar snap peas, snow peas, strawberries and watermelons.

Earlier this year, Steve's achievements were recognised at the Australian Vegetable Industry Awards. Ladybird Organics was awarded the 2009 Brisbane Produce Market Innovative Marketing Award for the development of biodegradable packaging for its

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Building the brand

According to Steve Skopilianos, building a recognisable brand requires a clear vision, determination, and the willingness to take a risk.

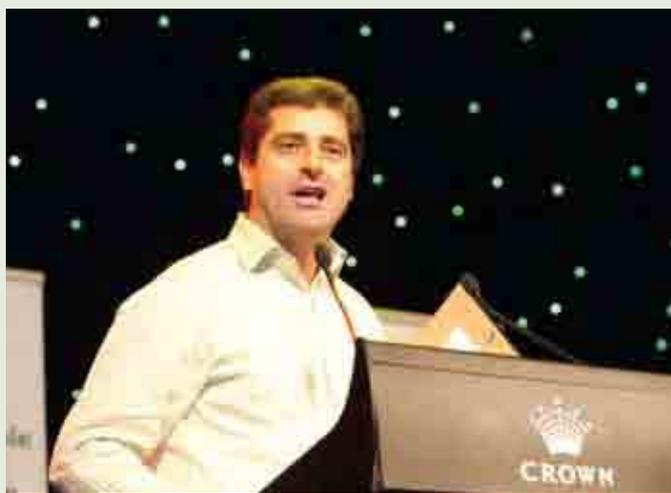
When Steve Skopilianos converted the family's farming business to organic production, it was the perfect time to give the company a new name and identity.

"We had been operating under the name of Keilor Valley Gardens for a long time, but I felt that our move to organics required a fresh look and feel for the business," he said.

Seeking the expertise of a marketing agency, Steve was presented with the concept that now embodies the Ladybird Organics brand.

"I knew that I was looking for something contemporary and professional that would reflect the vision of the company. At the same time, it was an entirely new look for us and I wasn't sure how the market would respond."

After consultation with friends, family and colleagues, Steve took the plunge and he hasn't looked back since. His strikingly-packaged produce can be found in most supermarkets, and is recognised by consumers as one of the leading organic salad brands in the country.



Steve Skopilianos, Director Ladybird Organics, accepts the Brisbane Produce Market Innovative Marketing Award at the Australian Vegetable Industry Conference gala dinner in Melbourne in May this year.

In the bag

A significant element of the Ladybird brand ethos is its environmental consciousness, and it is Steve's response to waste management that has packed the greatest punch with respect to marketing his product.

Concerned about how the market would respond to conventional packaging of organic produce, Steve set out to find alternatives that would lessen the impact of plastic packaging on the environment. It is this spirit of innovation that led him to win the 2009 Brisbane Produce Market Innovative Marketing Award at the Australian Vegetable Industry Awards.

"In 2006 I attended the PMA conference in San Diego in the United States, where I discovered a number of producers using biodegradable packaging for their fresh produce. This got me thinking about how I could package my own produce. When I returned to Australia, I began the hunt for a suitable product," he said.

Months of research revealed that no locally-made products suited Steve's needs, so he had to look elsewhere. Manufactured in Germany, the biodegradable bags used at Ladybird Organics are made from PLA, a polymer derived from cornstarch. It is completely biodegradable, turning into water and carbon dioxide during composting.

"The bags can be placed on a compost heap—not in a compost bin—and, provided they are exposed to sufficient heat and air, they are designed to break down after eight to 12 weeks," said Steve.

The bags cost around four times as much as conventional produce bags; however, Steve believes that the returns on his brand make the investment worthwhile. ^{va}

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salad range [see panel].

“Becoming an organic producer was just the first step towards a broader commitment to becoming sustainable producers, and the biodegradable packaging is part of that vision,” he said.

Steve acknowledges that switching to organic production can be a lengthy process, and the experience has presented challenges along the way.

“All farming is difficult, irrespective of whether you farm organically or otherwise. When we converted from a conventional farming operation we eliminated some of our problems, but we also experienced a new set of problems that we have had to learn to overcome.”

Hands-on solutions

One of the biggest issues for organic producers is effective weed control. At present there are no suitable organic herbicide alternatives, so weeds must be controlled manually.

“It’s probably the number one issue I have to tackle as an organic producer. We mechanically cultivate between the crops as much as possible, but essentially the only way to control weeds is to employ more people to manually pull them out,” said Steve.

As well as removing unwanted vegetation, Steve has also made a commitment to improve the natural vegetation surrounding his land and waterways. This has included building up natural habitats adjacent to his crops to encourage the establishment of beneficial insect populations.

“In the early days we used to spray the natural vegetation with molasses to keep the local insect populations at beneficial levels,” he said.

Water savings

A large part of Ladybird’s environmental management plan is the efficient and responsible use of water. Strategies for reducing water use include the introduction of computer-controlled irrigation, and irrigating at night to reduce evaporation.

“Night-time watering also means



Steve Skopilianos was one of the first 10 growers to join the EnviroVeg program.

“We get emails and phone calls from consumers thanking us for being thoughtful about the environment.”

that we can take advantage of off-peak electricity rates, which means further financial savings,” he said.

Where possible, the business recycles and re-uses water, and an onsite recycling system collects wash water for use on crops. Where overhead irrigation is used, Steve has reduced the size of nozzles; however, he believes that the greatest savings are achieved through a combination of drip irrigation, compost and soil-moisture monitoring equipment. He claims to have achieved up to a 70 per cent saving on water use with this system.

“There are so many advantages. Not only can we make every megalitre of water stretch further, but it is also more efficient for the plants because the water is supplied at the roots and it minimises weeds.”

Perfect packaging

One of the more innovative changes to Steve’s business includes the decision to use

biodegradable packaging for his range of packaged lettuce. Made from polylactic acid (PLA), a plastic derived from cornstarch, the packaging offers an ethical alternative to conventional plastic, with the added benefit of a longer shelf life.

“We felt that if we had packaged our product in normal plastic, consumers would have rejected our prices. Also, the ethos of organic production is about reducing our environmental impact. The packaging is fabulous, and the marketing advantage it has given us is phenomenal. We get so many emails and phone calls from consumers thanking us for going that extra step, and being thoughtful about the environment,” he said.

“Even our slogan, ‘Crawling with natural goodness’, has prompted positive feedback. Earlier this year we had a lady buy one of our bags of rocket from a supermarket, and she emailed us because she found a ladybird inside the bag. Normally, when we get someone contacting us about insects in our produce, it’s not very favourable. But on this occasion this lady was delighted to find that our slogan was more than a catchphrase.

“It’s refreshing to get a comment like that, and it really reiterates that our branding works well.”

On the farm, Steve has taken additional measures to reduce packaging waste, asking suppliers to minimise external packaging. He encourages other growers to do what they can to run their businesses more sustainably.

“I’m not suggesting that organic production is the way to go for everyone, but there are certainly small changes that can be made that can make a difference. If we can trigger a new way of thinking about how we produce food, then maybe we can make inroads into a more sustainable vegetable industry.” **va**