NOTICE
ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY AGRICULTURE

This is a new publication of success stories of Estonian Rural Development Plan issued by Estonian National Rural Network Support Unit. Previous publications include “Notice the Innovative Agriculture”, “Notice LEADER” and a number of other publications of LEADER success stories.

The publication gives an overview of the measures implemented within the framework of agri-environment support scheme in 2007–2013. You can gain an insight into eleven success stories presenting reasons for agricultural producers to pursue environmentally friendly agriculture or organic farming and the impact of agri-environment support of the Estonian Rural Development Plan 2007–2013 (ERDP) on the application of these measures.

The area under environmentally friendly management was approximately 400 000 ha and the area under organic farming over 126 000 ha supported from agri-environment support measures of the RDP. Supports have contributed to the preservation of endangered breeds and species and Natura 2000 areas, as well as to the maintenance of semi-natural habitats and the restoration of stonewalls.

In addition to success stories, the description, objectives and information of measures for the period 2014–2020 have been provided.

Agri-environment support measures can briefly be described by five key words:
- biodiversity
- soil protection
- water protection
- endangered species
- landscapes

Each story can be expanded to at least three key words because the pursued environmentally friendly activities are meeting several objectives at a time.

The Estonian National Rural Network Support Unit is grateful to the Estonian Agricultural Research Centre for compiling the texts of the agri-environment measures, as well as to the Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs for the overview of the implementation of the agri-environment support scheme.

Dear Reader

The publication has received support from the Estonian Rural Development Plan 2014–2020 through the technical assistance resources allocated to activities of the Estonian Rural Network Unit.

Rural and Innovation Network Bureau of the Rural Economy Research Centre
ERDP 2007–2013 Axis 2 — Supporting Environmentally Friendly Agriculture

Food production as any other type of activity has a certain impact on the environment which can be either good or bad. Very intensive management methods are too capital-using whereas not managing the land is not good for the nature.

Different management methods and the diversity of landscapes are the prerequisites for the preservation of biodiversity. How to achieve biodiversity when market prices favour monoculture production and it is cheaper to keep cattle in barns all year round? It can be said for certain that agri-environment measures will be implemented as long as they are in accordance with good agricultural practice and are not very costly.

Agri-environmental support schemes of the Rural Development Plan have been introduced for encouraging agricultural producers to apply more environmentally friendly methods. Agri-environmental payments compensate fully or partly for income forgone or additional costs of environmentally friendly management.

A total of 942.84 million euros was paid from the funds of the second Estonian Rural Development Plan (ERDP) 2007–2013. The most significant share (37.7%) of the budget was paid for Axis 1 supports (improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector), almost the same proportion (36.7%) was paid for Axis 2 supports (improving the environment and the countryside). Payments for Axis 3 supports (quality of life in rural area and diversification) contributed to 12.3%, payments for Axis 4 (LEADER) supports to 9.0% and payments for technical assistance (Axis 5) to 4.3% of the budget. Breakdown of ERDP 2007–2013 funds between different axes is provided in figure 1.
Breakdown of RDP 2007–2013 payments by axes

The following measures were implemented within the framework of improving the environment and the countryside, i.e. Axis 2:

1. Support for less-favoured areas
2. Natura 2000 support for agricultural land
3. Measure 2.3 – agri-environmental support
   • Submeasure 2.3.1 – environmentally friendly management
   • Submeasure 2.3.2 – support for organic production
   • Submeasure 2.3.3 – support for keeping animals of local endangered breeds
   • Submeasure 2.3.4 – support for growing plants of local varieties
   • Submeasure 2.3.5 – support for the maintenance of semi-natural habitats
4. Measure 2.4 – animal welfare: support for grazing animals
5. Measure 2.5 – non-productive investments
   • Submeasure 2.5.1 – support for the establishment and restoration of stonewalls
   • Submeasure 2.5.2 – support for the establishment of mixed species hedgerows
6. Measure 2.6 – support for the establishment of protection forest on agricultural land
7. Measure 2.7 – Natura 2000 support for private forest land

346.53 million euros paid within the framework of Axis 2 was divided between the measures as follows: agri-environmental support contributed to 66.9% of total Axis 2 support, support for less-favoured areas to 18.10%, animal welfare to 7.27%, Natura 2000 support for agricultural land to 1.44%, Natura 2000 support for private forest land to 0.09% of total Axis 2 support. Breakdown of Axis 2 support between measures is provided in figure 2.

The budget of agri-environmental support (AES) scheme was divided between submeasures as follows: 54.38% of the budget accounted for environmentally friendly management, 32.18% for organic production, 11.81% for the maintenance of semi-natural habitats, 1.58% for keeping animals of local endangered breeds and 0.05% of the support scheme accounted for growing plants of local varieties. Breakdown of the agri-environment budget between submeasures is provided in figure 3.

Sille Teiter,
Chief Specialist of the Agri-Environment Bureau of the Ministry of Rural Affairs
In fact, the Farming Practices of Our Ancestors Were Environmentally Friendly

Diverse nature, beautiful landscapes, local breeds and varieties, fertile soil, clean water and air and planned agricultural production are all worth preserving and improving. In summary, this is environmentally friendly management.

In fact, our ancestors’ farming practices were environmentally friendly – the field had to feed the current family and next generations. It was considered natural that everyday farming practices were nature-conscious.

The situation changed in the soviet time when the state owned the land and agriculture functioned according to the planned economy and excessive use of fertilizers and plant production products had undesirable impact on the natural environment and the way of thinking of the people.

After restoring the republic correction of mistakes had to be made in the course of restoration of farms and agricultural holdings. Agricultural production had to be adjusted to the new conditions. However, the knowledge and resources were scarce. Only after joining the European Union new possibilities opened up and payments of environmental support were initiated in 2004. In the period 2007–2013 the support measure was replaced by environmentally friendly management support imposing more strict requirements. The period of meeting the obligations of the environmentally friendly management scheme is five years. In the first years of using the payment scheme the main objective was to increase the awareness of the producers about the environmental values and the impact of their own holding and encourage environmentally planning in agriculture. In the second (2007–2013) and third (2014–2020) period, in addition to initiating and continuing the use of environmentally friendly management, necessity for increasing the level of knowledge of agricultural producers and coping with the requirements of the support measure was identified.

Environmental friendly production support payments were initiated in 2004. In the period 2007–2013 the support measure was replaced by environmentally friendly management support imposing more strict requirements. The period of meeting the obligations of the environmentally friendly management scheme is five years. In the first years of using the payment scheme the main objective was to increase the awareness of the producers about the environmental values and the impact of their own holding and encourage environmentally planning in agriculture. In the second (2007–2013) and third (2014–2020) period, in addition to initiating and continuing the use of environmentally friendly management, necessity for increasing the level of knowledge of agricultural producers and coping with the requirements of the support measure was identified.

In Words

Environmentally friendly management (EFM) support is paid for the activities encouraging Estonian agricultural producers to better manage and maintain the natural environment and agricultural land. It means that agri-environmental payments to agricultural producers compensate for income foregone or additional costs of managing in environmentally friendly way.

The beneficiary of the EFM support payment is committed to keep a field-book, follow crop rotation and successive cropping and use fertilizers and pesticides in a way which has the least adverse effect on the environment. The obligations also include taking soil samples for every five years and participation in basic and in-service trainings. The larger the area under EFM support the higher the likelihood of reducing the risk to the whole environment as a result of fertilization and crop rotation plans, production of legumes and fulfilling other obligations. Producers have to complete several trainings throughout the period of using the support scheme, so that their knowledge about the environment and the issues related to the production has considerably improved.

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Environmentally friendly management

- first implemented as environmentally friendly production support in 2004
- in 2009–2014 the number of beneficiaries involved 1 489 to 1 941 producers and the area under support depending on the specific year was 355 693 to 467 093 hectares
- this support will continue in the period 2014–2020

In Numbers

To date the EFM support has contributed to the largest share of agri-environmental support scheme payments both in terms of the number of applicants and the area of land. In 2007 environmentally friendly management support was paid to 5 554 producers for 467 093 hectares. In 2007–2013 the number of beneficiaries and the area under support decreased.

In 2013 support was paid to 1 856 producers for 399 286 ha. In case of some of the producers the previous commitment ended and from 2009 onwards the long-term and natural grasslands were not supported any longer and some of the producers went over to organic production.

The area under EFM support was most significant in Jõgeva, Järva, Lääne-Viru, Tartu and Viljandi county, which is only justified because these areas are characterised by fertile soils and active agricultural production. In terms of crops grain contributed to the most considerable share (~40%) of the area under EFM support scheme. Legumes accounted for the second largest (~35%) group. Oilseed crops, grasses and other crops were cultivated on a significantly smaller area.

Results

In summary, the production of legumes increased as a result of the application of the EFM support scheme compensating partially for the need for nitrogen of plants; thus, contributing to a decrease in the use of nitrogen fertilizers and the related risk to the water environment.

As a result of using the information from soil samples, compiling a fertilisation plan and fulfilling the requirement of participating in trainings, producers were encouraged to use fertilisers in a more balanced way. Overall, it contributed to the improvement of soil fertility. Moreover, winter plant cover contributed to the reduction of nutrient leaching from soil and soil erosion. The use of pesticides was more conscious – as a result, the chemical load on the environment decreased and the quality of water improved.

Implementation of the requirement for successive cropping limited the spread of weeds and pests contributing to the reduction of the use of pesticides. Also, the use of seed treated against weeds and pests and forbidding the use of glyphosate in the vegetation period of the crops played a role in improving soil fertility. In addition, participation in trainings raised the awareness of the producers and contributed to better implementation of all EFM requirements.

Within the period 2014–2020, in addition to regular crops, support can be applied for field production of vegetables, medicinal and aromatic plants and strawberry production under the EFM support scheme. Support can be applied for the establishment of honey gathering areas of bees and for additional water protection. In 2015 applications for support were submitted for the EFM 2014–2020 period. Support was paid to 1 419 producers for 433 419 ha which covers approximately 50% of the whole utilised agricultural area in Estonia.
When you go to the Parduse Farm in Viljandi county for the first time, it is possible you drive right past it! It is hard to realize from a far that it is such a large agricultural enterprise. It is so because in this traditional farmstead everything has its own place. The 120 milking cows live in a joyfully-looking yellow cow-barn. The first 30 milking cows were bought in 1983. The old barn was renovated in 2011 and the milking robots – first ones in the Viljandi county – were put into use. The enterprise is keeping the whole Malõh family of five members busy all year round.

The farm has a total of 280 ha of land, 120 ha of which is in crops, while the rest is grassland. The fields are managed in an environmentally friendly way. The requirements of the support for environmentally friendly management are easy to be met here. As the cattle need silage, the legumes, different hay plants and crops, have been grown here since the beginning of farming. The large share of legumes in the crop rotation plan decreases the need for additional fertilisation, since the leguminous plants fix nitrogen and therefore enrich the soil. “The yield of the fields has improved,” says Tiit Malõh, the son of the family. He has studied agriculture in the Estonian University of Life Sciences.

There is more to the environmentally friendly attitude at Parduse. For instance, already for five years they have practiced no-till seeding or direct drilling – a way of growing crops or pasture from year to year without disturbing the soil through tillage. This method saves time and fuel, which otherwise would be used to drive back and forth to fields with different machines. “We use ploughing only when turning old grasslands into fields,” explains Til Malõh. In terms of slurry management, they use a special service that enables placing the slurry into the soil during cultivation. That helps to add more nitrogen directly into the soil.

While silage is usually stored in a storage facility, trench or single bales, then here the bales are stored in a long plastic tube. This is another innovation of the young farmer Tiit. It is a good method to save the plastic, which normally is wrapped around every individual bale. The unwrapped bales are also easier to handle. Moreover, the winding “silage snake” attracts the attention of the visitors, who are bountiful at Parduse. During the Open Farm Day of 2016 about 260 people visited the farm. “The kids of the surrounding schools and kindergartens come to visit us often,” adds Heli, the landlady of the farm.

As no farm is ever finished, the family has some dreams, too. Their dreams include their own slurry spreading machine and the elimination of the old manure storage facility. But everything happens for its own time!

The Parduse Farm stands out for very good planning – the size of the enterprise is just big enough to be managed by the family itself. Therefore, they are not planning on widening their farm any time soon – the farm is just the right size to have some time to enjoy the life in the countryside.
At Pajusi, both environment and the community are held important.

The surroundings of Põltsamaa are a historical agricultural area. The former successful Pajusi collective farm has given a kick to many enterprises. One of these is the Pajusi ABF LLC, which incorporates several companies dealing with dairy production and organic beef cattle.

The areas around the Põltsamaa River belong to the Adavere–Põltsamaa region of nitrate sensitive areas, and therefore the environment should be kept in mind within every step of agricultural activities. There are strict rules to protect the ground water, so the amount of nitrogen allowed to be placed into the soil with fertilizers is smaller than elsewhere. The norms set out in the Water Act are followed very carefully. The local people are also aware of the restrictions, so there is no way a company could ignore the restrictions. “We take care of our environment because we live here,” says Lembit Paal, who has managed and led the enterprise for a long time.

All together there are 2300 animals and 2300 ha of land managed by the Pajusi ABF LLC. “Some of our lands are located on peat soils, where normal agricultural activities have proved impracticable, as it would require too many resources. In spring the areas adjacent to the rivers become flooded and are difficult to cultivate,” explains Lembit Paal. The need for sustainable planning of the company’s resources has led them to environmentally friendly management. The historic grasslands of the Põltsamaa floodplain have now been restored and the open landscape is enjoyed by beef cattle. The same kind of sight was last seen here about 30 years ago. The cattle manager of organic beef, Kairit Vahenurm, was not even born yet at that time, but she is certainly happy to see her herd graze freely. “The animals have become used to the riverside pasture. They are so happy to move back outside in the springtime,” says Kairit Vahenurm. The large pastures provide good resting areas for migratory birds that pass by in spring and autumn. The polder areas where brushwood has been removed create new opportunities for fishermen and swimmers.

There are 210 Hereford and Angus breed animals in the organic cattle herd. In raising the cattle, the rules of “Production of Grass-fed Beef” food quality scheme are taken into consideration. Organic barley, winter turnip rape and rye are cultivated on the fields. The other company of the Pajusi ABF has dairy cattle with 1030 milking cows. All the necessary winter fodder is grown here, on the company’s fields. The fields of grain cereal and rape are managed in an environmentally friendly way. The prerequisites for obtaining the support for environmentally friendly management include crop rotation, cultivation of leguminous plants and the existence of vegetation in winter on at least 1/3 of the fields. These requirements are easy to follow, since it is self-evident to care about the soils of fields and quality of the local ground water.

There are 41 employees at the Pajusi ABF. People like to work here, because decent working conditions and welfare of the employees are of great matter to the leader of the company. Good machines are important to maintain the health of the employees as well as the environment. Some of the employees are also active members of the community, organizing many local events. For many years, old-style threshing and history of agriculture have been introduced to the local schoolchildren. Thus, caring about the environment, as well as about the community, the agricultural activities will carry on at Pajusi for far into the future.

Beneficiary:
Pajusi ABF LLC, lembit@pajusiabf.ee
Location:
Põltsamaa village, Pajusi rural municipality, Jõgeva county

Estonian Rural Development Plan 2007–2013:
• Support for environmentally friendly management
• Support for grazing animals
• Support for keeping animals of local endangered breeds
• Support for growing plants of local varieties

Production:
Dairy production (1 000 milking cows); crop farming; beef cattle (over 300 organic beef animals) and organic farming (550 ha, in total of 4 000 ha of land in agricultural use)

Triin Nõu
Photos: The Rural Network

"We take care of our environment because we live here."

The main positive characteristics of ‘Sangaste’ rye are frost-hardiness of a populations of animals and large corns. Long ears and strong stalks are also important characteristics of ‘Sangaste’ rye in terms of breeding and genetics. In addition, good winter hardiness and plant disease resistance enable to reduce the use of pesticides against plant diseases and weed and therefore, ‘Sangaste’ rye is well suited for the production of organic rye.

Despite of the positive characteristics the production of ‘Sangaste’ rye has been relatively modest, mainly because of the long stalks which may easily bend down with the weight of grain and makes harvesting more difficult which in turn reduces the crop yield.

For the purpose of preservation of Estonian cultural heritage, as well as the genetic diversity the measure “Support for growing plants of local varieties (‘Sangaste’ rye)” was introduced in 2009 within the framework of Estonian Rural Development Plan 2007–2013.

Before the introduction of the measure ‘Sangaste’ rye was cultivated only on about 100 hectares. In the first year the scope of support was applied for was very modest — seven applications for support for 303 hectares. The best results were achieved in 2012 when 44 agricultural holdings applied for support for 1 046 hectares. In the rest of the years within the period support was applied for 629—872 hectares. The crop area of ‘Sangaste’ rye has usually been about 18% of the total area under rye.

Support for the cultivation of ‘Sangaste’ rye will continue within the period 2014–2020. The list of plants subject to support for growing plants of local varieties has been extended to 50 fruit and berry varieties, the potatoe variety ‘Anda’, the field pea variety ‘Mehels’, the field bean variety ‘Jõgeva’ and the white clover ‘Jõgeva 4’.

In terms of genetic diversity in agriculture it is important to have different varieties and breeds. Protection and preservation of native breeds is necessary for the preservation of the diversity of nature and cultural heritage. In Estonia the agricultural animals of local endangered breeds are the Estonian Native Horse, Estonian Heavy Draught Horse, universal-type Tori Horse and old-type Tori Horse, Estonian Native Cattle and Estonian quail.

The breed of agricultural animal registered in the list of endangered breeds is of historic Estonian origin; the breed or a distinguishable part of a population of the same species is deemed to be endangered if the number of female or male animals used for breeding is less than one thousand or less than twenty respectively or if the number of female or male birds used for breeding is less than ten thousand or less than one thousand respectively.

The objective of the support for keeping animals of local endangered breeds is to ensure the preservation of local endangered breeds valuable for cultural heritage and genetic diversity. The nationwide support payments for raising Estonian native horses were initiated under agri-environment support measure in 2002. In 2005, the support scheme continued and support for the production of Estonian Native Horse, Tori Horse, Estonian Heavy Draught Horse and Estonian Native Cattle was paid within the framework of the Rural Development Plan.

In 2014 the old-type Tori Horse was included in the list of endangered breeds and in 2015 for the first time support for the production of Estonian pure-breed quails could be applied. In fact, it is the only breed of fowl bred in Estonia.

The measure of keeping animals of local endangered breeds has met its objectives — the number of animals is increasing slowly. In the first year (2007) of the ERPD period support of local endangered breeds was paid for 3148 grazing animals. In 2015 support was paid for 3241 grazing animals.

The number of Estonian Native Horses under support has increased by a half since 2007. Estonian Native Horse is short-legged, it has a long body and strong body build. It is a universal small horse and can be used as a family and a tourist horse, as well as a riding horse for children. In 2015 Estonian Native Horses under support were most numerous on our two largest islands (Saaremaa and Hiiumaa) whereas on the islands the number of Estonian Heavy Draught Horse under support was the smallest (the largest number in Ida-Viru county).

Two main characteristic features of Tori horse are universality — it is suitable for both working and riding, and the calm nature. Tori Horse is an ideal breed for teaching riding to the beginners. In the past years Tori Horse has also been successfully used in pulling sport. The number of Tori Horses has remained relatively stable.

The number of Estonian Native Cattle under support has both increased and decreased within the period when compared to 2007. Estonian Native Cattle is of local origin, bred from the aboriginal herd and adapted to our climate, keeping and foraging conditions.

In 2015 Estonian Native Cattle under support was most numerous in Pärnu, Saare and Harju county (over 100 animals).

The measure of keeping animals of local endangered breeds has met its objectives — the number of animals is increasing steadily. In the first year (2007) of the ERPD period support of local endangered breeds was paid for 2 472 grazing animals. In 2015 support was paid for 3148 grazing animals. In addition, support for the production of Estonian quail was introduced and can be applied for.

In 2015 the number of Estonian Heavy Draught Horse has increased by 77%. The Estonian Heavy Draught Horse has calm temperament and it is an energetic, good-natured and short-legged agricultural horse.

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Nele Tamm, the owner of the Sepa farm located in the Koonga rural municipality, is not at all a lifelong farmer. She inherited the farm with two cows from her mother in 2009. And even though she had planned to start her Master studies in the university, life had its own plans and Nele started farming instead.

The Sepa Farm has been recognized as an organic farm since 2002 already. The organic way of thinking suits well with Nele’s value judgements but in this area it is also inevitability. “There are only piles of stones here, it makes no sense to plough and sow. It is beneficial to be organic here,” says Nele. She is well grounded and does not create illusions about a modern large holding. Nele also admits that there is not a very high demand for organic food, because it is quite expensive. However, the demand for ordinary farm food is on the rise.

There are beef animals and milking cows, two goats and lots of chicken in the Sepa farm. They have goats because, paradoxically, Nele is allergic to cow’s milk. The reason for chicks is to get eggs for the special cheese — sõir — and ice-cream. These two products make up the largest share of the farm’s income. “Farming takes money, processing brings money back,” says Nele in her sober-minded way. So, she has set her hopes on the dairy plant, which is already working in two shifts. At the same time, the farmer is experimenting with developing different types of cheeses and other dairy products. She is dreaming of a spacious cheese boiler, new refrigerators and a cheese cellar to be built into the threshing house. But the biggest challenge in the area is the lack of trustworthy employees. Many undertakings would advance a lot faster if there were more people ready to do some serious work.

Different support schemes are the matter of survival, believes Nele. In addition to the support for the maintenance of semi-natural habitats, support for organic farming and support for less-favoured areas, the support for the establishment and restoration of stonewalls has also been very important. About 4 kilometres of stonewalls have been restored here in the Pikavere village, initiated by the Sepa farm. “The support for restoring stonewalls is very important additional income for a small farm. Otherwise we would not be able to do this kind of extra work.” The support has helped to improve the landscapes of the whole village and to save several historical farm fields at the Ura landscape protection area.

The farm also receives support for keeping animals of local endangered breeds because there are the Estonian native cattle on the farm. These calm animals are the best ones to take care of the semi-natural habitats.

However, Sepa farm is about to face some changes. Nele wants to hand the farm over to her two grown-up sons. The sons are already helping, but it is Nele who needs some rest and changes. “Farming may sound romantic, but in reality it means constant, non-stop work,” says Nele. In addition, the young men would be able to apply for several support measures that she does not qualify for any more. But it is hard to believe that Nele, full of energy and desire to work, would step aside very far! During the years, farming has become a lifestyle for her, even though it is a quite crazy lifestyle.
The Kaarli farm is situated in the Lääne-Viru county, in the heart of the Pandivere upland with the most fertile soils of Estonia. Everything grows well here and while organic farming is a natural and economically beneficial way of farming on the poor soils of West Estonia, then here, on good soils, there are almost no organic farms at all. The Kaarli farm located on the edge of Väike-Maarja is an interesting exception here.

The Kaarli farm is currently managed mostly by the young farmer Kadri Kopso with her husband Lembit. The owner of the farm is still Kadri’s father Mart Lepik, whose parents founded the farm in 1938. From there on, the fate of the farm was like the fate of all other successful farms after World War II – the farmer was imprisoned, the family was cast out of their home and farm buildings were turned to serve the Soviet Union.

When Kadri and Lembit came to help in 2009, they decided to listen to their hearts and start farming in the organic way. Moreover, fertilizers and pesticides were very expensive and caused health disorders, such as allergies. “At that time, my husband and I did not have any experience in farming and organic farming seemed like an easier option. Farming is complicated, and we were totally inexperienced,” — that’s how Kadri explains the reasons for going organic. “Sure, the yields have decreased and it has made my father somewhat sad.” says Kadri.

The first turning point of the farm had already taken place by that time — in 1997, Mart bought a mechanical mill with the support of European Union. That is when the current main activity of the farm — grinding cereal crops and producing foodstuff — started. The ‘Sangaste’ rye variety, oats and spelt are grown on the farm, other agricultural products are outsourced.

All the grains end up in the mill. The milling work is mostly hand-work: a bucket of grain goes in; a bucket of flour comes out. The milling work and fieldwork are largely Lembit’s responsibilities. The mill produces whole-grain flours, groats and cereal flakes. There is also an oil press that enables the production of natural extra virgin edible oils. The ordering form of the Kaarli farm has 50 different items — flours, flakes, groats, grains and different oils and seeds. The most exciting items are perhaps oat groats, pea flour and camelina oil. As the farm has grown, Kadri and Lembit have employed three more people to help with the mill work, packaging and sales work. Kadri is rightfully proud to be able to provide jobs for the local people.

The third turning point of the Kaarli farm was in 2012, when a bakery was set up with the support of LEADER measure. That’s where Kadri keeps herself occupied. She is baking spelt cookies and seed chips that she invented herself. And, of course, the rye bread – during the fair season Kadri bakes as much as 100 loaves of bread a week! There are seven different types of rye bread, the most popular one being the bread with seeds.

The experience of Kaarli farm is confirmed by other organic farms — in order to be successful on the market, you need to add value to the products. A grain farmer grows grain, grinds it in the mill and makes cookies, while a dairy farmer turns the milk into cheese. The more work you put in the final product, the higher price you can ask for it on the market. And the market, always in need, is thankful, too.

Text: Helen Külvik
Photos: Heikki Avent
Semi-natural habitats protect us and give us a warning

Semi-natural habitats are traditional man-made habitats – however, human activity has been limited to mowing and grazing livestock. As a result, species richness and unique landscape has been developed. Semi-natural habitats play a very important role in the preservation of biodiversity – diverse habitats provide different plant and animal species, including rare species and species in need of protection, with habitats. Semi-natural habitats include endangered habitats with extreme species richness such as wooded meadows and alvars, coastal meadows, and paludified meadows are stopover and foraging habitats for migration birds and the habitats for shorebirds (Charadriiformes). Meadows can only be preserved in case they are mown and used for grazing – however, when these activities are discontinued, meadows become overgrown with shrubs and forest and lose their initial value.

Protected natural objects in the environmental register include a total of 76 775 hectares of semi-natural habitats – however, some of the habitats are outside the protected areas.

Management of semi-natural habitats is complicated because these areas are often too wet, stony, difficult to access or requiring intensive manual work or specific technical equipment etc. Therefore, producers are not motivated to manage these areas and additional support is needed for the preservation of species richness.

ERDP support for the maintenance of semi-natural habitats in Natura 2000 areas was introduced in 2007 and the objective was to ensure the favourable conservation status of the semi-natural habitats in Natura 2000 areas (both in terms of the quality of the habitat and the size of the area of the habitat).

Within the period 2007–2013 the area under the support for the maintenance of semi-natural habitats increased from 14 757 to 25 177 hectares.

The objective of the support for the establishment and restoration of stonewalls was to contribute to the preservation of traditional agricultural landscapes of high historic, cultural and landscape value. Restoration and maintenance of stonewalls has been supported since 2001 when the measure was first implemented in two pilot areas (in Lümanda and Kihekonna rural municipality in Saare county and in Palamuse rural municipality in Jõgeva county). Within the framework of the ERDP 2004–2006 a total of ~41 km of the establishment of stonewalls, ~86 km of the restoration of stonewalls and ~36 km of the maintenance of stonewalls was supported across Estonia.

The first call for applications for the establishment and restoration of stonewalls within the period 2007–2013 was in 2009, the second call for applications in 2010 and the third in 2012. The amount of support applied for in the first call for applications exceeded the budget for the whole period, so it was decided that from 2009 support would be granted only for the restoration of stonewalls, the establishment of stonewalls will not be support within the rest of the ERDP period 2007–2013. Restoration of a stonewall means dismantling a wall or a part of it and rebuilding or restoring it to its original height and length in the local style, i.e. increasing the height and length of a stone-wall by at least half of its current dimensions.

The requirements for receiving support were identical in three rounds. It was possible to apply for support for the restoration of the stonewalls which were located on utilized agricultural area or for the stonewalls of which at least 80% was bordering to agricultural land and the wall could be visually traced in the landscape, i.e. at least the lowest row of stones had to be preserved.

The restored stonewalls are indirectly related to the preservation of an increase in biodiversity because stonewalls are suitable habitats and foraging sites for various species for example, mammals such as Eurasian gypsy shrew, amphibians such as Natterjack toad, reptiles such as Sand lizard, invertebrates such as Myrhalopa, mooses such as Streaky feather-moss, ferns such as Wall-spleenwort.

In order to preserve the current habitats, stones should mostly be gathered from fields to improve the water and air regime of the soil and increase soil productivity. Also, the distance of cultivated land from the stone-wall should not be less than 1.5 m.

The beneficiary had an obligation to preserve the stone-wall for at least five years (the requirement was valid for all three calls for applications). Overall, interest in the support measure was considerable; however, a great number of the applications did not meet the requirements of the support measure and therefore, the amount of funding applied for exceeded the budget. The share of approved applications was less than 50% of the total number of submitted applications.

Within the period 2007–2014 a total of 3 049 309 euros of support were paid for the restoration of 128.7 km of stonewalls (contributing to 43% of the target level). The stonewall subject to support had to be located in the areas where stonewalls were historically present; therefore, the most significant share of the support (86.4% of the total support of the measure) in the period under consideration was granted for Saare county (65.4%), Pärnu county (11.5%) and Lääne county (9.6%).

The restored stonewalls are indirectly related to the preservation of an increase in biodiversity because stonewalls are suitable habitats and foraging sites for various species for example, mammals such as Eurasian gypsy shrew, amphibians such as Natterjack toad, reptiles such as Sand lizard, invertebrates such as Myrhalopa, mooses such as Streaky feather-moss, ferns such as Wall-spleenwort.

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The Peculiar Kurese Farm

The Kurese nature protection farm, as the owner Urmas Vahur has called it, is located in Koonga rural municipality, Pärnu county. Urmas Vahur is a long-time man of nature and is very dedicated to his somewhat different “farm”. The farm has about 220 ha of land and he rents some more from the state, altogether managing some 250 ha of heritage landscapes. Most of the territory lies in the Kurese landscape protection area, while the rest covers Estonia’s largest wooded meadow at Nedrema.

Maintenance and restoration of semi-natural habitats are Urmas’ aims and the main job. The semi-natural habitats of Kurese have to be witnessed with one’s own eye, since it is hard to imagine something that extensive. The Kurese landscape protection area lies on alvars and the centre of the area is formed by the ancient village of Kurese, which now lies in just a few ruins and stonewalls.

Stonewalls are Urmas’ favourites. By the summer of 2016 he had restored about 5 km of stonewalls. But on the map dating from 1896 there were as many as 35–40 km of stonewalls in Kurese village! However, the walk on the streets of Kurese is already impressive. Here and there stonewalls run toward the horizon and the layout of streets is easily recognizable. The walk here is like a step into another world – to the distant history.

The last indigenous dweller of Kurese passed away in 1973. However, Kurese is not totally neglected – the extensive alvars are a summer home for cattle. Every summer, about 200 young animals are brought here to take care of about 170 ha of semi-natural grasslands. In the autumn, when they go back home, they will become milking cows.

There are no community or technical facilities at Kurese. The drinking points for animals are solved by self-flowing spring ponds. Tractors are rarely used – almost all work related to animals and the maintenance of semi-natural habitats is handwork, except the removal of beams. “This area here is much more organic than all other Estonian organic areas summed together,” Urmas believes.

Urmas was brought up in the middle of wetlands. He has studied forestry and worked as the chief expert of nature protection of the Pärnu county. The work for semi-natural habitats at Kurese and the Nedrema wooded meadow is at the same time his hobby. This kind of work requires being outside most of the time, working very hard, for a very little monetary return. Obviously, one cannot do that without passion and a bit of freakiness – and Urmas possesses both qualities. Even though the belief in and the love of the work he is doing are the main reasons for such an undertaking, the different support measures have provided great help. The most important of the measures is the support for semi-natural habitats. Without this support, it would not be possible to take care of such extensive areas of semi-natural habitats. Without the support for restoration of stonewalls there would be no stonewalls here. The support for grazing animals is a great driver for renting cattle.

Urmas has a great dream – he wants his lands to be declared as the Kurese heritage protection area. There are many reasons for that – in addition to the ancient village there are dozens of ancient artefacts that have been found during archaeological excavations on the lands of Kurese. “Unfortunately, the National Heritage Board of Estonia is not ready yet to establish that kind of protected area,” says Urmas with regret in his voice. One day, his determination will bring him success for sure.

Beneficiary: SE Urmas Vahur, www.kurese.wordpress.com
Location: Kurese village, Koonga rural municipality, Pärnu county
Estonian Rural Development Plan 2007–2013:
• Support for the maintenance of semi-natural habitats;
• NATURA 2000 support for agricultural land;
• Support for grazing animals;
• Support for less-favoured areas;
• Support for the establishment and restoration of stonewalls
Production:
Maintenance of semi-natural habitats (250 ha); grazing of rental cattle (~200 young beef animals)

Text and photos: Helen Külvik

*This area here is much more organic than all other Estonian organic areas summed together.*
The Iisaka Farm, Paradise of Sheep

“The best tasting mutton comes from the sheep that have been grazed on semi-natural grasslands.”

The Iisaka farm is situated on the limestone plain of North-Estonia. The soil layer is very thin here and does not provide much produce—such a habitat is called an alvar. The experience of the Iisaka farm has proven, however, that this fact is no obstacle for farming. It’s just important that you find the right activity. Here, on alvars, the right choice is sheep—that is the conclusion Väino Veersalu and his wife reached after they had started farming in the beginning of 1990s and experimented with swine, cows and other animals.

As a matter fact, it is hard to imagine any other animals here between the low junipers. The sheep are just right. The sheep are also the best managers of semi-natural habitats, says Priidu Veersalu, the young master of the farm, who recently graduated from the Olustvere School of Service and Rural Economics. “The best-tasting mutton comes from the sheep that have been grazed on semi-natural grasslands,” is Priidu convinced.

But the perfect taste of mutton is not the only reason why Priidu grazes his sheep specifically on semi-natural grasslands. It is equally important for him to have a splendid environment around him. Indeed, the well-restored and maintained alvars, which look like someone has painted some happy sheep and long stonewalls on a canvas, pose a stunning view. Priidu and his family can enjoy this view every day! Priidu says, with a grin, that now the neighbours are asking if Priidu would like to take care of their land, too. A good proof that he has done a good job!

The Veersalu family is raising Estonian dark-headed sheep. The flock was acknowledged as a breeding flock in 2010. Priidu, the youngest son of the family, took over the farm quite recently, in 2015, but the father and son are still working together. He is very happy about the newly founded mentoring program financed by the Estonian Rural Development Plan, saying that he has received important know-how from his mentor Lillila Talu, who is an experienced sheep farmer of South-Estonia. “I can always ask for her advice,” refers Priidu to this new service.

However, sheep farming is not the only thing that makes Priidu’s eyes sparkle. He is also engaged in folk dance as well as carpentry. The latter brings essential additional income to the farm. But restoring furniture is still a hobby. “Everyone in our family is engaged in some kind of handicraft,” says Priidu. His mother and sisters are skilful artisans and their handiwork brings income to the farm, too. People can buy different wool knitwear, blankets and pillows as well as lambskin and rags from the farm and the fairs they are attending.

And, of course, they are selling mutton, because in addition to the breeding stock the Iisaka farm also raises sheep for meat. Has the young farmer become fed up with mutton? Priidu laughs and says: “Well, for the past 3–4 years I have started to eat mutton again.”
The objective of animal welfare support is to increase the knowledge of livestock farmers on animal welfare and support agricultural producers who fulfil higher requirements for animal welfare. This way animal welfare will be improved and more natural keeping conditions for the cattle will be ensured. Grazing contributes to the extension of grasslands, including semi-natural habitats which play an important role as valuable habitats. In addition, grazing helps to preserve and increase the area of grasslands in agricultural landscapes.

The support measure was introduced in 2009; the beneficiary was obliged to graze agricultural animals (bovine animals, horses, goats and sheep). Since 2015, in addition to grazing animals, animal welfare support can also be applied for pigs and laying hens as one-year commitment. In terms of the number of animals a considerable share of the welfare support was applied for pigs over 9 000 contributing to 26% of the total animal units under support. The second large group was bovine animals – 80 659 animals (67%). Horses and sheep contributed 35% both, laying hens to 0.5% and geese to 0.1% of the total animal units.

In 2015 animal welfare support was granted to 1 887 cattle breeders. 65% of the beneficiaries had also received cattle grazing support within 2010–2014. Despite of a decrease in all animal species, and the difficult situation in agriculture in 2015, the beneficiaries are still investing in improving the conditions for the keeping of animals. The number of beneficiaries of the animal welfare support was the biggest in Saare and Pärnu county (8 332) where the number of animal producers decreased by 27%. LFA support contributed to the improvement of the maintenance and ongoing use of the supported areas. Moreover, LFA support was also implemented indirectly through other supports in the LFA rural municipalities characterized by a significant share of low productivity land which cannot be easily cultivated. The fact that the quality of soils in the LFA rural municipalities was in most cases worse than in Estonia on average (40 points) referred to the unsuitability of the natural conditions for agricultural production. The economic indicators in these rural municipalities are lower than in areas of conventional production conditions.

In Estonia less-favoured areas were designated by rural municipalities in 2004. Initially there were 101 rural municipalities of LFA in Estonia (figure 1). Selection of the rural municipalities of LFAs was based on the requirements of the European Council (EC) Regulation. In 2004–2013 the number of beneficiaries had also increased by the end of the RDP period in comparison to the first years of the period. However, the number of beneficiaries was not increasing on annual basis. For example, the number of beneficiaries was the smallest (8 332) in 2009 and increased to the highest level by the end of the period – up to 9 235 in 2013.

In LFA rural municipalities a total of 627 000 ha of agricultural land has been registered. The area of LFA agricultural area has increased annually. In 2007 support was paid for 333 312 hectares whereas in 2013 380 280 ha of agricultural land was under support. The number of LFA beneficiaries also increased by the end of the TOP period. In Estonia less-favoured areas are divided into areas with poor production conditions and specific areas which could be designated by the state.
Rural Entrepreneurship Keeps the Family Together

The Mätiku farm located at Oldremsa, between Lihula and Pärnu, is a true example of rural lifestyle. The farm has been a home to six children, and all of them are still involved with the farm activities, one way or another.

The iron lady of the farm is Helga Pikkmets. She and her husband Aivar, who used to take care of the machinery, started farming with three cows. Now there are 55 cows grazing on the pasture. Being out on the pasture is the basic right of the Mätiku cattle. In winter-time, however, they have to stay inside and it’s the capacity of the barn that sets limits to the size of the cattle herd. But the cows go outside in winter, too, just to breathe some fresh air. The family is dreaming of a bigger barn — ideally it would accommodate 150 cows. One day the barn will be ready.

The forage is made locally, like in any proper farm. There are grasslands and fields laying on 370 ha, so in terms of West-Estonia, it is a rather large farm. The milk production is decent, about 8800 litres per year, which is a very good result for an organic farm. For many years, the raw milk could be purchased from the automatic raw milk machines provided by the commercial association ‘Estonian Organic’ (‘Eesti Mahe’). Now the milk is mostly sold to Lithuania. However, those who wish can still buy the milk straight from the farm. About 100 litres of milk a week is sold to individual buyers.

The Pikkmets family has always followed the organic path — that is the only way for them. In Soviet times, Aivar was the head of the collective farm and witnessed the poisoning of fields with his own eyes. When he started farming, he had no desire to feed all the toxic substances to his family. Helga adds that organic farming is also much simpler and less expensive than modern agriculture, at least in their case: “The cow looks around and decides what she eats or does not eat. Why would I have to learn all that, if the cow already knows?”

The agricultural lands here are poor, too. They are located by the peatland — wet and peaty. Even if you fertilize, it would not get any better, it would just add costs. Because of the poor lands, the farm can apply for the support for less-favoured areas. As the lands lie on Natura 2000 designated areas, there is also support for maintaining the semi-natural habitats and the Natura 2000 support for agricultural land. About 2/3 of the machinery has been bought with the help of investment grants.

As an innovation, the Pikkmets family farmers cultivate catch crops and prepare the fields so that there would be vegetation in the winter. These methods help to improve the soil productivity considerably. “Just two or three years of clover can do miracles with the land,” Helga is convinced.

Mirjam, the energetic daughter of the Pikkmets family, adds that in their area it is a common trend that many intensive farmers are going organic. Like her four brothers, Mirjam has stayed in the home area and is currently developing her own organic farm in the neighbouring household. She is focusing on a small dairy plant, sheep and poultry farming. The active young woman is making very different dairy products and can already provide employment for others.

The family of the Mätiku farm and the Oldremsa surroundings in general creates hopes for the continuity of rural life. There are kids who grow up drinking warm milk and feeling the coarse tongue of a calf on their cheeks. They know where the eggs and cheese come from. Moreover, they grow up with the knowledge that a cow needs to be out grazing — then it is just as happy as this little boy, perhaps the future farmer, in his yard.

Text and photos: Helen Külvik

The lands are so poor here that even if you fertilize, it wouldn’t get any better.
The Vormsi Island of the Estonian western coast encompasses 93 km² and half of its territory is covered with forest. The island is a part of the Viinamere Natura 2000 special protection area. Moreover, part of the island belongs to the Vormsi landscape protection area. There are about 1000 ha of arable lands on the island, but the average quality rating of the arable land is among the lowest in Estonia. Therefore, the natural circumstances as well as the restrictions set by nature protection considerations are in favour of environmentally-friendly agriculture.

Ege and Gert Kanarbik started farming in 2007 with mowing the coastal meadows. A couple of years later they bought 10 beef animals to continue the maintenance of the coastal meadows. As the territory of the coastal meadows was 54 ha, it soon became clear that there was a need for more animals. So, in 2011 they purchased 51 more cows and as of today, the animals are taking care of 120 ha of coastal meadows. There are 200 Hereford and Simmental breed cows in the herd and currently they form the biggest cattle herd of the island.

The enterprise has been organic from its start. There just is no other way for this nature-loving family. In addition to the coastal meadows, the farmers have 350 ha of organic arable land, where they grow winter forage for the cattle. The animals stay outside for 5 months during the warm season. There are about 20 km of fences, which need to be checked every day. In autumn, the animals are brought into the barn. During the calving season, in late autumn and early winter, the animals are observed through cameras, in order to provide help if needed. As the dwelling house is connected with the barn, the whole family gets to be part of this special period of birth. The coastal meadows of Vormsi have been restored for about ten years now. Compared to the first years, the meadows are now cleared of the brushwood and reed. The open landscapes, which provide great views and better access to the coastline, are also important nesting and resting areas for numerous bird species. “There are quite many rare bird species in and around the coastal meadows, and the vegetation of the meadows has become much more diverse,” says Ege about the progress they have made.

The farmers have had a lot of support from the land conservation specialists of the Environmental Board, who always give advice when new coastal meadows are started to be restored and managed. The aim is to maintain the managed lands and to expand, if possible. The expansion process involves negotiations with dozens of landowners, as the island is divided into small parcels of property. Moreover, for historical reasons the landowners are often Swedes, who do not live on the island. It is a great bonus that Ege can speak Swedish!

The support of the Estonian Rural Development Plan has enabled the family to purchase land and facilities for the cattle. All this would not have been possible without the support, as when they started, the young family had nothing but good will. They have expanded the farm year by year and currently, the LLC Vormsi MT is the biggest agricultural enterprise on the Vormsi Island. The Family Kanarbik has never regretted their decision to become involved in agriculture. They hope their farm would inspire others to become farmers as well. The oldest son of the family is planning to continue his studies in an agricultural university after graduation, so it seems that inspiration has already been spread.

**There are quite many rare bird species in and around the coastal meadows, and the vegetation of the meadows has become much more diverse.*

*Text: Triin Nõu
Photos: The Rural Network and Ege Kanarbik
In organic farming chemical pesticides, artificial fertilisers and genetically modified organisms are not used for plant production. In terms of most field crops appropriate crop rotations are practiced, for the improvement of soil fertility nutrients are provided by legumes. Organically reared animals can only be fed with organic feed for the improvement of soil fertility. Nutrients are provided by legumes, and carry out field tests. In Estonia organic farming was initiated by Henry Steiner and his wife Gabriela in the early 1920s. Another pioneer of organic farming is Sir Albert Howard who returned to Great Britain in 1924. A German anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner who held lectures on the foundations of biodynamic agriculture which were published in 1924. Another pioneer of organic farming is Sir Albert Howard who was studying local natural agriculture with his wife Gabriela in India, and tried to relate the local approach to western production methods. At the beginning of the 1930s he returned to Great Britain and started to introduce the newly developed agricultural system and carry out field tests. In Estonia organic farming was initiated by Estonian Biodynamic Association in 1989.

Compliance to the requirements of organic farming in Estonia is regulated by the Organic Farming Act and several organic farming regulations. Organic farming supports introduced within the framework of ERDP in 2004 have played a significant role in defining the conditions for organic farming.

After the introduction of the support measure the importance of organic farming in Estonia has rapidly increased. In 2003 the area under organic farming support in Estonia was 33 588 ha whereas the area under organic farming support increased to 126 242 by 2013 and support was granted to 1 114 organic farms. The area under organic farming support accounted for 82% of the area in the organic farming register in 2013.

Since 2009 organic farming support has been paid for organic animal husbandry. In 2014 the number of organically raised sheep was the biggest (approximately 40 428) whereas the number of organically raised cattle (36 780) was also considerable. The number of cattle has increased almost twice in comparison to 2009.

The research carried out by the Agricultural Research Centre in 2009–2015 demonstrates that organic farming has had a favourable impact on the living conditions of farmland birds and bumblebees. The abundance and number of species of farmland birds has been significantly higher in organic holdings than in the fields of EFRA and SAP holdings, mostly for the reason that the area of grassland in organic holdings is larger.

Karl Sepp, Chief Specialist of the Agricultural Research Bureau of the Agricultural Research Centre

Natura 2000 is a pan-European network of protected areas. Its objective is to ensure the protection of rare or endangered bird, animal and plant species and their habitats.

Support for organic production

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- In 2009–2014 the number of beneficiaries involved 1 152 to 1 407 producers and the area under support depending of the specific year was 81 636 to 126 242 hectares
- This support will continue in the period 2014–2020 as a support for conversion to organic farming and a support for continuing organic farming

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Pan-European network protects endangered species and habitats

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Within the period 2007–2014 the area under Natura 2000 support increased from 20 647 ha to 24 334 hectares and the number of beneficiaries from 1 336 to 1 692. Permanent grassland (including partly semi-natural habitats) contributed to over 60% of the area under support which is a more favourable habitat for birds in agricultural landscape than arable land.

In 2014 the land plots under Natura 2000 support included habitats for more than 1 400 animal, plant, and fungus or lichen species of protection categories I–III registered in Estonian Nature Information System. For example, the field plots under support had 42 habitats for category I animal species. Habitats for the dunlin were most numerous (15). Through Natura 2000 agricultural area support even more attention is being paid to habitats and birds’ directive. The objective of the support was to ensure conformity with nature protection requirements in Natura 2000 Network areas, maintain agricultural activity and ensure the efficient management of Natura 2000 areas. The main condition for the beneficiary is to meet the requirements of the nature conservation area, special conservation area or the habitat provided in the protection rules.

Within the period 2007–2014 the area under Natura 2000 support
It is a known fact that all temporary things tend to be the most persistent ones. This is just the case with the Koplimäe organic farm. The Müür family of the Koplimäe farm had no intention to start farming, but that’s exactly what happened. At first, they started cultivating spelt for their own needs. At the time, around 2000, spelt was still almost an entirely unknown crop in Estonia.

While in the beginning they were able to have their spelt flour milled at Saikla mill, the mill was soon closed and the family bought a small hand mill. But everything is still hand-work. There are no mechanized facilities on the farm. “We cannot be compared with other mills, because our place is like a boutique – it is all handwork, every grain goes through our hands,” says Marju Müür, the hostess of the farm.

Marju has grown up here in Pöide. She has quite a strong feeling for spelt: “I fell in love with spelt when I was learning to be a baker on the island of Gotland, Sweden, in 2010. Gotland is special because they have found really old varieties of spelt, which possess extraordinary baking qualities.” Currently the Müürs are cultivating both varieties from Gotland as well as from Germany.

The busy family is also cultivating buckwheat. They started with buckwheat in 2006, when no-one had yet heard of the benefits of raw buckwheat. “There was no good idea what to do with raw buckwheat, we just fed it to the animals,” farmer Olev Müür is laughing. Now the buckwheat is a popular item, and not just as raw grain! At Koplimäe farm, buckwheat is milled into groats, flour and semolina. Buckwheat flowers are used as well – these make good tea. The tea strengthens blood vessels and is useful in many other ways, and tastes good as well. “Many useful things do not taste good, but the buckwheat flower tea is a splendid exception,” Marju confirms. They make buckwheat pillows, too.

The Müür family members believe that organic farming is the right option, especially on the small and stony fields of the Saaremaa Island. The Koplimäe farm has been recognized as an organic farm since 1999. The family has set future hopes on the younger son Ar-tur, who is planning to attend the Olustvere School of Service and Rural Economics soon, in order to become a farmer. The family has all members occupied – Olev’s father Vello welds and takes care of the machinery.

There is no sense of stagnation at the Koplimäe farm. Instead, innovations are always welcomed here. Now they have set up solar panels, which help to save quite a lot of energy, especially on the sunny Saaremaa Island. It can easily be said that the products made on the farm are as organic as can be!

But that’s not all. The farm also includes a café! In the café, a visitor can buy anything that is produced on the Koplimäe farm: spelt and buckwheat products, especially flour and different organic cookies. Marje believes that adding value to products is the right way to go. Flour is inexpensive and it does not pay to transport it to the mainland, but there is enough market space for the organic cookies. And last, but not least – the Koplimäe farm also has an internet store. The key to achieving a goal lies in the doing.
The family enterprise at Peri, Põlva county, has set its target on producing organic vegetables and on promoting organic food in general. The farmer Tiina Länkur, who studied horticulture, felt already during his studies that there must be an alternative to all the poisonous sprays and mineral fertilizers. “In the 1990s, when I was studying to become a farmer, I was a big dissident in my school and my ideas often opposed those of the others. I did the things I sincerely believed in, and I still do. I believe that the food grown without poisoning is good for people as well as for the soil organisms and the surrounding nature,” says Tiina. Based on her convictions, organic farming has now become the lifestyle of the whole family.

There are 72 ha of land on the farm. On these lands the family grows strawberries, chokeberries, carrots, beetroots, onions, sweet corn, pumpkins, zucchini, oats, buckwheat and the ‘Sangaste’ variety of ryeces. As they only cultivate plants, crop rotation is very carefully studied in order to guarantee soil fertility. On some of the lands they always cultivate red clover, which fixes nitrogen in the air and therefore increases soil fertility.

The family handles all the work at the farm. Vegetables are grown on less than a hectare, since vegetable cultivation is the work requiring the most labour. There are several tools that make the work a little easier and which can be pulled by a tractor, but organic leaf fertilizer has to be spread by hand and for managing the weeds — well, a sharp hoe and fast-moving hands are still the best tools there.

Many organic farmers have developed their signature products that they are known for on the market. A bit surprisingly, the Peri organic farm is known for its sweet corn, which is already requested for in June. Another “hit” vegetable is a Japanese kind of orange squash, which is not much known in Estonia, but is becoming a new favourite because of its handy size, nice orange colour and no-peel skin.

“The people call the pumpkins orange squash because of their shape and colour,” Tiina explains. The interesting varieties have already attracted the attention of several chefs of the restaurants of Tallinn and Tartu.

Organic production that will be sold in ordinary food stores has to be clearly distinguished from the equivalent products that are not organic. Therefore, packaging takes a lot of time at an organic farm. “By the time we are harvesting sweet corn, a small packaging line will hopefully arrive here, with the monetary support of the LEADER programme. It will help us to pack the ears faster,” says the farmer Ander Konks about the plans of the near future.

The farming family is happy to share their knowledge about organic farming and organic food. They have organized workshops and lectures on organic food at their farm. They have also hosted about 200 children from the kindergartens and school of Tartu which have joined the health awareness programme. The pupils of the nearby Rosma School are quite frequent visitors during crop sowing and harvesting. About 250 visitors came over on the Open Farm Day in 2015. The farm also hosts volunteers and apprentices from abroad.

The open-minded family likes to experience. A few years ago, they accepted the proposal of Estonian Crop Research Institute to grow organic carrot and onion seeds. Therefore, the organic seeds can be distributed to other organic farmers. Time will show if there will be some other plant seeds added to the collection. However, it is most certain that the enthusiastic family will carry on cultivating organic vegetables and grain crops as well as propagating organic food.
In 1989, when Arvo Veidenberg returned to the farm lands that had belonged to his father, he started farming by growing young plants and roses. However, young plants were hard to sell and the farmer soon decided that it was time to re-orientate the business. As the farm had always had a milking cow, the farmer decided to start with dairy production.

The increasing number of cattle needed a barn. The family could not afford an insulated barn, so they built Estonia’s first cold cattle barn in 1993. The idea for such a barn came from the people of the Estonian Agricultural University, who had seen such a barn in the United States. Today all Estonian dairy cattle are accommodated in such cold cattle barns.

At first, all milk was sold to a collector. During the Russian crises, the milk price dropped three times and this fact inspired the idea to start processing milk on the farm. In 1998 they started with yoghurt, because producing curd cheese and cheese seemed like a complicated science. “As a matter of fact, yoghurt is a much more complicated item to produce. If we had known that producing curd cheese and regular cheese was so easy, we would have started producing these a long time ago,” says Arvo Veidenberg about the dairy processing history of the farm.

The Pajumäe farm has received the title of the Organic Farm of the Year for long-time sustainable management in 2010 and the prize for promoting a green economy in 2012. Moreover, the farm was named as Estonian Best Production Farm and the Farm of the Year in 2012. As environmentally-friendly farming is a constantly developing field, the farming family keeps its eye on scientific literature in order to put new sustainable agricultural practices into use.

Although the products of the Pajumäe farm are well known among Estonians, it is a never-ending task to stay known and to find modern solutions. Viljar Veidenberg, the son of the family taking over the farming responsibilities, has done a great job here. The farm now has a new logo and the products have newly designed labels. The home page has been updated and activities of the farm are made visible on Facebook. “The presence on social media is a natural part of client communication. Social media lets our fans know about interesting things going on at the farm,” explains Viljar Veidenberg. It is quite sure that there will be more interesting news to come. And who knows, maybe one day the roses that gave the farm a start, will find their way to dairy products? As in rose petal jam, for instance.

“Organic farming is the normal farming.” - Arvo Veidenberg

Text: Triin Nõu
Photos: The Rural Network
NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IS IN THE HANDS OF FARMERS!