

Organic chestnuts

Rohan and Deanne Whelan, Wandiligong, Victoria



Approximately 4 acres of our property in the Wandiligong Valley in NE Victoria is devoted to chestnuts and the terrain varies from reasonably flat to very steep. We have about 200 trees that age from 8 years to 130 years old and we have been certified organic for approximately 12 years. Growing and caring for our trees in an “organic” way was an instinctive approach that we had adopted well before any steps were

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taken to become certified. A relatively small orchard enables a hands on approach with regards to weeding and mulching. The steepness of our block provided added incentive to get our hands dirty.

Planting and grafting material needs to be obtained from a certified source. Initial grafting and planting material in our orchard was obtained from a non-certified source. Subsequently, all such material is from our own orchard. Our orchard underwent three years of pre-certification before becoming fully certified.

The greatest difficulties in growing chestnuts organically are weed control and redistribution of composted husks. Certified organic fertilizers sourced from Hybrid Ag in Wangaratta are tailored specifically to chestnut needs and based on soil samples from multiple locations in the orchard. Irrigation was used initially to aid in establishment of younger trees but ceased in 2009.

Mowing of the flatter sections of the orchard takes place from early spring up to harvest. The steep sections are left until early January to allow the kangaroo grass to seed and then a combination of mowing and brush-cutting is carried out at least twice before harvest. Mowing/mulching, concentrated under the bigger trees, is undertaken post harvest through to early winter to assist decomposition of residual leaf and husk material.

Disease control methods for most serious chestnut diseases are not certified organic and therefore not employed in our orchard. Correct treatment of tree wounds, encouragement of a healthy understory and good soil management are all considered to promote a healthy disease resistant tree....and then cross your fingers!

Pests to contend with include parrots, wallabies, and kangaroos and all feed on chestnuts. No methods of control are used.

The advantages of producing chestnuts organically include the lower costs due to no chemical use and the healthier soils through annual recycling of composted husks as mulch. Disadvantages are the increased manual labour and the limited capacity to manage diseases. However we have not yet enjoyed a market premium but a more proactive marketing effort is now viable due to production increase.



Top and Above: composted husks are used as mulch around trees in the orchard.