

Harcourt Organic Farming Co-op



Champion:

Katie and Hugh Finlay

Age of co-op:

Three years

Industry:

Orchardists

Location:

Harcourt, VIC

Region:

warm climate, good soils, agriculture dominated economy, a small Central Highlands town – the 'apple centre' of Victoria.



Harcourt Organic Farming Co-op (HOFC) is a collaboration of diverse organic farmers who lease land on a single farm in Harcourt and collectively market and sell their produce. They are passionate about learning their craft, feeding our community, and making direct and meaningful connections with their customers. Farming Together helped HOFC with their business model and business structure development including the development of lease agreements and the formation of their co-operative.

Success Story

- Five different enterprises are utilising the farm and are co-op members.
- Purposefully only just profitable to remain solvent.
- Income from three-member types:
 - basic fee for all members,
 - trading fee for trading members,
 - a levy on enterprise income for trading members.
- Other co-op income includes farm-tours with opportunities for other diversification and value-adding options.
- Each enterprise pays a lease payment to the landowners, plus their water and power usage.
- Collective expenses include book-keeping, organic certification and levy, organisation memberships, etc.



The Catalyst for Change

- Katie and Hugh wanted to stay living on the farm with a succession plan of how to 'gracefully exit' when they could no longer physically work on the farm.
- It was important for Katie and Hugh that the land stay productive and increase in productivity. They utilised 12 acres for 5 000 fruit trees but there was a lot of potential for the remaining acreage.

The Opportunities

- Lease the land to young and or landless farmers.
- Develop a number of opportunities to transition out of direct, on-land farming.
- Create a multi-enterprise model as a co-op to facilitate the opportunity.
- Develop a model to turn original nursery into a commercial business through a partnership.
- Mentoring of experienced with less experienced farmers.
- Online teaching business for organic fruit growing.

The Challenges

- Working with different personalities and people.
- The decision-making process.
- Being challenged in unexpected and different ways.
- Having fixed ideas about what should happen.
- Thinking differently and challenging others to see your ideas.

The Harcourt Organic Farming Co-op Enterprises

- Tellurian Fruit Gardens
- Gung Hoe Growers
- Sellar Farmhouse Dairy
- Carr's Organic Fruit Tree Nursery
- Grow Great Fruit

The Enablers

- Worked with experts to explore a lot of different collaborative models to decide which was most suited to their needs.
- The established team formed part of the planning process to work through any potential or perceived issues and ensure everyone was on the same page.
- All members of the co-op (those working on the property) have a positive and co-operative relationship; they all get along.
- A well-considered selection process. Members are carefully selected to ensure they fit in well with the vision and ethos of the HOFC community, "*it's critical to the success of the co-op that the people who are in here share values and share common ideas about what's acceptable and what's not*" (Hugh Finlay, 2020).
- A strong consultation and negotiation process to form a solid contractual agreement.
- A culture of clear communication and consistent checking-in with everyone's feelings.

Future Looking

- **Prioritise relationships and authentic working together.** "*We didn't say right we're starting a co-op and this is what we're going to do, we said we want to work together, how are we going to do that*" (Hugh Finlay, 2020).
- **Be thorough.** Keep watertight legal agreements - not just handshake agreements.
- **Let go of expectations and be open to exploring new ways of doing things.** It is not an easy road, but extremely rewarding and worth the effort.