



Jim O'Connor and Enda O'Hart. Photos: Mark Moore

The Rossies are going organic...

and why you should consider joining them

With 379 organic farms in the county (6% of the national total) Roscommon is second only to Cork (464) for the number of farmers who have opted to go organic

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“I reckon there’s an organic farm in every parish in Roscommon,” says store producer Jim O’Connor. With his wife Martina, Jim farms in the townland of Ballymore just south of Boyle.

We visited the O’Connors and three other Roscommon organic farm families to find out why they made the switch from conventional farming and whether more farmers, and you,

should follow their lead.

A beef producer all his life, Jim is one of 2,000 farmers who, following transition, entered the DAFM Organic Farming scheme on 1 January 2023. There are now more than 5,000 organic farmers in the country. More will be needed to meet the Government’s goal of 10% of land farmed organically by 2030.

“The farm totals 62 hectares divided into four blocks with the furthest 25km away,” explains Jim. The suckler herd consists of Charolais cross cows and an Aberdeen Angus bull. Jim also buys weanlings often at monthly organic livestock sales held in Drumshanbo, Roscommon and Elphin Marts. Most of the animals are finished on the farm, some are sold as stores.

Asked about why he made the switch, Jim says: "Spiralling input costs and the uncertainty of an income from beef production made me seriously think about how I was farming. After attending farm walks and talks on organic farms and speaking to established organic farmers, I made the decision to convert to organic farming.

"The biggest challenge was to ensure that my housing complies."

More generous space allowances are required and cattle and sheep must have access to a dry-bedded lying area. For Jim, this meant providing bedding in an existing loose house and replacing some slats with solid slabs. Sourcing bedding material can be a serious challenge, but Jim says he has "a very reliable supplier of straw."

Farming system

"My overall farming system hasn't changed that much as I wasn't a big user of chemical fertiliser or herbicides. I may look at reducing numbers to ease workload and see how much grass my farm can grow as we ease into the first few years of organics."

Jim believes that the 'mind-set in organics has changed' especially with the number of farmers converting increasing.

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DRUMANILRA ORGANIC FARM



'We are optimistic about the future of organic farming'

Liam and Justina Gavin and their young family moved back from the UK in 2012 to take over Liam's family farm, located just outside Boyle in the townland of Drumanilra and overlooking Lough Key.

"Our goals are to feed our family with food grown by our own hands and to generate a sustainable and independent income for the farm by supplying quality produce and food to consumers," says Liam. "In 2012 we re-fenced the farm, bought in breeding Dexter stock and entered the farm into organic conversion."

Drumanilra Dexters

By summer 2014 the Drumanilra Dexter Burger was born. Liam had spent summers in the 1980s touring Ireland with a group of friends serving barbeque burgers to hungry audiences at music festivals. By 2014, the Dexter herd had grown enough to provide the Gavins with meat. Their first step to direct selling was buying a catering trailer they named 'Shepherd's Hut'. That summer Justina went on the tour of Ireland, this time selling Drumanilra Farm Dexter Burgers, again at festivals.

Farm Kitchen

Next they purchased an old house and garden in Boyle. The house was renovated and an indoor dining room and small farm shop added. The 'Shepherd's Hut' became the Drumanilra Farm Kitchen which proved a great success. Eventually it was listed as Tripadvisor's number one place to eat in Co Roscommon. Building relationships with other organic farmers is an important part of Liam and Justina's ethos.

Honestly Farm Kitchen

With their plans on hold due to Covid, Honestly Farm Kitchen (pictured below) eventually opened in Carrick-on-Shannon in December 2021. Honestly Farm Kitchen, Strandhill followed in summer 2022.

Liam and Justina very much believe in team effort. There are currently circa 65 people employed in the Honestly Farm Kitchen network. On the farm there are three members of staff: a horticulturist, farm manager, and a person looking after livestock feeding and bedding.



Farm growth

The farm has grown in parallel with the business. There are now 300 acres being farmed organically including a herd of 50 pedigree Dexter cows. There is a sheep flock with organic lambs also bought in from a neighbouring farm. A total of 80 lambs are finished.

Six polytunnels and an outdoor market garden yield organic salads and vegetables. Organic eggs come from 200 laying hens. "We also buy produce from other organic producers," says Liam. "We are optimistic about the future for organics and we believe we can keep improving on what is already being done."



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BALLYMORE ORGANIC FARM

'I always wanted to convert to organic vegetable growing'

Hubert Flanagan is a third generation livestock farmer in north Roscommon. He converted the cattle and sheep farm to organics in 2009. "Before ever converting, in my heart and soul I always wanted to commit to organic vegetable growing," he says.

In 2011, he started to grow organic vegetables. Since then he and his partner Nadine have been working to grow a customer base for the vegetables while also running the beef enterprise. "The farm is now made up of 30 hectares of grassland and 2.5 hectares of vegetables. The goal is to be of service to people who want fresh and local food," says Hubert.

Cattle enterprise

"We buy in store cattle at roughly 18 months old and bring them to finish at 30 months, he explains. "The finished animals are sold to Slaney Meats via Leitrim Organic Farmers Co-op in Drumshanbo. Cattle are purchased in autumn, wintered and sold off the farm the following year without any meal input."

As the cattle are exclusively grass fed, Hubert has reseeded fields with white and red clover with, he admits, varying degrees of success. "I would like to see an additional premium paid for grass fed organic cattle," he adds. He also feels that more organic marts are needed to prevent 'leakage' of fully organic animals back into the conventional market. He uses rushes as the main bedding material for his cattle.

Growing vegetables

The strategy for marketing the vegetables is that they are organic, seasonal, handpicked and local. A market had to be developed for the produce and in the early days Hubert went knocking on doors. The customer base also includes two local supermarkets along with wholesaling to other businesses.

The main crops are potatoes, carrots, kale, leeks, onions and spinach.



Hubert Flanagan began converting part of his farm to organic vegetable growing in 2011; (below) Hubert and Enda O'Hart.

There are also two polytunnels where you will find garlic, tomatoes, French beans and scallions. Hubert says he gets great satisfaction from the "appreciation of customers" and having his "hands in the soil" where it all starts. The older generation, in particular, "rave" about carrots and other vegetables produced organically on peaty soils.

Knowledge

Hubert says that since converting to organics, he takes every opportunity to expand his knowledge of organic

farming. "I attend farm walks, open days near and far, and join courses delivered through National Organic Training Skillnet (NOTS Drumshanbo) and Organic Growers of Ireland (OGI)."

Hubert has been a member of his local Teagasc organic discussion group (there are three in Roscommon) for many years. Hubert believes there is a lot to learn from what is happening on his own farm:

"Not one day goes without us learning something new from our plants or animals." He adds that he and Nadine aim to "implement all that we learn to provide our soil, plants and animals the utmost care and possibility to thrive."



ORGANIC BEEF AND TILLAGE

Conor Dowling, his wife Helen and their boys Liam (12), James (10), Sean (8) and Matthew (3) live in the parish of St John's between Athlone and Roscommon. They farm sucklers, beef and tillage (27 acres). The farm is closed, only occasional bulls or rams are brought in for breeding.

"We entered conversion in 2021, becoming fully organic in 2023," says Conor. "The only exception is the sheep enterprise which is still in transition since last year."

Conor admits he is fortunate to have some of the lighter, sandy soil in south Roscommon, suited to tillage. He grows oats, triticale, and winter barley and winter peas in combination. He sells the barley and peas mixture to an organic dairy farmer.

"I like that as an organic farmer you can experiment a bit. Even if a crop does poorly, you still have the organic payment. Conor is currently trying a combi-crop of winter oats and winter peas: "There is good by-pass protein in it for ewes pre-lambing and the crop also qualifies for the supplement under the protein aid scheme.

"We are fortunate that there is quite a bit of conventional tillage nearby which means contractors are available. A combine must be cleaned before going into an organic crop. An organic crop is lighter than a conventional crop and is usually ready to harvest earlier, helping to spread the harvest for contractors."

Workload

Conor describes how when farming conventionally he and Helen, a physiotherapist currently on a career break, felt that they were on a merry-go-round which involved carrying a lot of livestock. A lot of credit was needed to buy fertiliser and there was a heavy workload. (Conor works full time off-farm).

"Our animal sales are down a bit and we spend a bit more on contractors, as we have more dung to spread, but we have much lower fertiliser and meal costs.

"Half of the housing area must be straw bedded rather than on slats. With straw prices currently very high this is a deterrent for many farmers. We are fortunate to have our own supply of straw. There is a little more labour needed in winter spreading straw under cattle."

Conor sold his first organically produced cattle this January at 21



Conor and Helen Dowling with their sons Sean, Matthew, James and Liam on the family farm at St John's, Co Roscommon.

'I won't be going back to conventional farming'

months. Kill out was 340kg at €5.80/kg for Angus steers and heifers born to Limousin cows.

Organic beef

"They were fattened on red clover silage and barley and peas as a concentrate. In future I will keep them a bit longer as the prices for organic beef rise steadily during the spring," adds Conor.

"You have to live with a few more

weeds about the place – generally the gate is closed after sowing until harvest. but we are happy with our move into organics.

"There is nothing to be concerned about, especially if you have good housing to start with. There is a bit more admin being in organic but it is essential. It protects the organic area payment, the farm profit and viability. I won't be going back to conventional farming."

Steps to conversion

Step 1 Choose an Organic Certification Body and register as an organic operator

Step 2 Apply to join the DAFM Organic Farming Scheme

Step 3 Complete an Approved Training Course

Step 4 Complete and Submit a BISS Application

Inform yourself

There will be numerous organic farm walks taking place throughout the country

over the coming year where you can hear first-hand experience of what does and doesn't work.

Ideally, prospective organic farmers should complete the Organic Farming Principles course before making the decision to convert. Teagasc also has a team of three specialists and six dedicated organic advisors to assist those planning to convert. The Organic Farming Scheme OFS is due to open this autumn for new entrants.

Organic Farming Scheme Payment Rates (These are in addition to BISS payment).

	Year 1-2 - in conversion	Year 1-2 - in conversion	Year 3-5 - fully converted	Year 3-6 - fully converted
	<<70ha - €/ha	>70ha - €/ha	<<70ha - €/ha	>70ha - €/ha
Drystock	300	60	250	30
Tillage	320	60	270	30
Dairy	350	60	300	30
Horticulture	800	60	600	30

Participation payment = €2,000 in first year and €1,400 per year thereafter