

Sustainable Soil Management

The seven expensive traps for farmers wanting to manage their soil better

(using biological/organic products and farming practices)

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1. Products that are not scientific

- **Products based on wacky new-age theories**
- **Expensive products containing cheap materials (like molasses)**
- **Products with shiny labels and lots of water**
- **Products containing unidentified micro-organisms**

Watch out for products that appear thin and watery. Watch out for the smell of molasses. There's nothing wrong with molasses, and I often recommend it's use myself. But I don't sell it or water down products with it and add huge margins (ie. you can buy 200L of it normally for under \$100).

And don't be dazzled by "added trace elements". Sure, these elements are important....but they are also very cheap, especially in small quantities.

Beware of the added-water products. Ask yourself (and others) if the same product could have been purchased in a dry/granular/powdered form for a lot less. If a product contains, say, zinc sulfate, urea and wetting agent, then do the sums and work out if you could have mixed it up yourself for a lower price. And beware of liquid lime products, when you can purchase the dry product for a fraction of the cost.

Beware of microbial products where the organisms are unknown. How can you possibly know what a product will do if the organisms came from compost or worm castings? If the organisms are aerobic, then you can be fairly sure they'll do no harm, but what's to say they'll do anything more than what's already in the soil? There are billions of soil organisms. Most will do nothing very spectacular. Yet there are "superstars" in the microbe world which have been isolated and identified by scientists for their abilities to make a real difference to soil and plant health...and crop performance! Always ensure that any microbial product you use contains organisms that you know will actually DO something. Broad measurements of "active bacteria" or "active fungi" don't tell you very much at all.

And always use your logic. If something sounds magical and ethereal, then it probably is. The consultant/advisor SHOULD sound like he knows his stuff. And remember primarily that for a theory or product to be truly scientific and genuine, it should be measurable and repeatable. They should be able to tell you what to expect, and the results should be there.

2. The advisors have no real credibility – Lack of qualifications and experience

- **Advisors who don't understand real farming**
- **Advisors who don't understand soil chemistry**
- **Advisors with no university qualifications**
- **Advisors who came from nowhere, and “jumped on the bandwagon”**

Where did the consultant/advisor come from? What was he doing before? Does he have genuine qualifications, or was he simply trained by the company in the ways of its products? Ask them for their qualifications! Can they interpret a soil test? Do they understand the overall management needs of your crop? You come to them with a problem.....how can you be sure that their advice will be helpful and not detrimental? Or are they just trying to flog you something? Will they become your trusted crop advisor for many years to come, or will they move on once they've taken your money? Rightly or wrongly, biological products and sustainable farming is flavour of the month. There are new companies starting up all the time in order to cash in. Was your advisor working in the farming business before the bandwagon rolled past.....or did he just come running when he smelled the cash? Ask lots questions and decide for yourself.

3. Companies that have “the answers to everything.....a complete system”

- **They have a product to solve every problem**
- **They never suggest a product they don't sell.**
- **They never admit to not having an answer**

Do they have a genuine product or service they can offer you, due to a particular expertise in a particular area? Or are they opportunists who wish to squeeze you for every cent once they have you in their clutches? There's something very worrying when a company tries to keep you completely “in-house”, by trying to offer a complete range of everything to keep you from dealing with anybody else. What are they worried about? If they have genuine confidence in their product, they should welcome opposition....as opposition SHOULD highlight how good their product is in contrast. Maybe they're worried that you will find out the holes in their argument, as well as you may find genuine products which actually work? The fact is too that if they genuinely cared about you, your crops and your business, then they would know fully well that they can't possibly have the answers to all things, and should be pointing you in the direction of other suppliers of other products which will improve your soil and crops as well as to save you money. If they're reluctant to do this, then I would seriously question their motivation.

4. Companies that use scare-tactics and conspiracy theories about “the big chemical companies”

- **They will rely on scare-tactics and unknowns**
- **They will condemn all conventional farming practices as stupid or harmful**
- **They will claim to know “the truth that is being hidden from us”**

Ever get into an argument with a conspiracy theorist? You can't win! Because supposedly everything YOU know is due to the propaganda and misinformation you've been fed by the evil multinationals, and you can't disprove anything THEY say, because their arguments are based on “the truth” that the evil multinationals have been trying to hide from you. It's easy to make a living out of peoples fear. There is no research data to support what they say, because the evil multinationals have put the pressure on the universities, government

departments and research institutions to “hide the truth”. All “the evidence” has been hushed up and hidden, and “the lies” have been put in its place.

You just need to use your own intelligence here. Any farmer knows that ag chemicals work. You know that from your own experience. But most of you will have worked out (again, through your own observation and intelligence) that over-reliance on chemicals will eventually let you down. You know that “new country” always performs better than “flogged” country. And you know that it tends to take more chemical to get the same effect as the years go on. Intelligence tells you that there is a lot that works in natural systems, and that there must be something to gain by working WITH nature rather than against it. Intelligent people use the best of what’s available....and intelligent farmers use the best of nature combined with the conventional chemicals and methods that they need to get the job done!

5. Over-reliance on American authors, “experts” and assorted “soil gurus”

- **Very close affiliation with self-promoting American “experts” who will appear to endorse their products and methods**
- **A lack of original ideas based on grass-roots LOCAL experience and trials**
- **Isn’t it remarkable how many “experts” America produces?**

I must say that I shudder every time I see a photo of a company representative “on the stage with”, or shaking hands with the latest Chuck, Hank or Larry who’s blown into town. Why do we still have this cultural cringe? We used to bow down to emissaries from Mother England, and now we bow to anybody and anything American. Why are we so easily impressed? We can’t see any of their successes, nor can we meet or talk with any of their clients. How do we know if they know their stuff or not? This is Australia! We have our own soil types, climatic conditions and farming methods. We should be looking to those who can relate directly to our situations and experiences. We should also be following the Aussie tradition of listening to the “quiet achievers” who are too busy actually doing their jobs to devote the time and effort it must take to publicise themselves as “world experts”. I’d love to write books myself and to go on publicity tours (no, actually I’d hate the second part!), but I’m too busy to spare the time.

And we should also question those who need to name-drop and to quote the self-appointed “experts” in order to back up the validity of their products and theories. They should have enough knowledge of the subject to explain themselves in their own words, and they should have the crop successes and happy clients here in Australia to support them and to give you some confidence in them.

6. Companies that don’t talk in terms of measurable improvements, ie. greater yield and quality

- **Products that promote “balance” and “soil health”, but don’t give you any improved MEASURABLE crop performance increase.**
- **Claims that measurable results will take a long time, and that some sort of “balance” is required first.**
- **Measurements of “balance” and “health” according to their own system, ie. not consistent with accepted scientific standards.**

Never allow yourselves to be side-tracked! Why are you farming? For warm ‘n’ fuzzy feelings? Or to produce high yields of quality crops that you can sell for a profit? “Sustainability” means the ability to keeping doing just that for a very long time. Any

“balances” and measures of “health” need to lead very directly to improved and sustained yields and quality. If not, then they are a waste of time and money. Yes, certain factors and aspects of soil health can take time to fix. But there needs to be at least SOME measurable improvement in the short term to justify the expenditure and to give you some confidence that it’s actually working. Margins in farming are often tight. Anyone supplying products and services into this industry should understand that, and know that you can’t feed your kids with “balance”. Ask them! Ask them what their product or service can do to make your crops bigger and better! If they can’t be specific, then don’t waste your time with them.

And beware of the “in-house” stuff again. Do their products and methods stack up against acceptable industry and scientific standards? Or only against their own unknown standards? Can you find independent research that backs up and explains what they’re doing, or is it impossible to measure? Do they use standard scientific measurements (like cfu/100ml for bacterial assays), or do they have their own “superior” methods which can’t be compared?

Bottom line! DOES achieving their measurement of “balance” equal sustained high yields and great quality produce? If not, what’s the point?

7. The products are not economically beneficial

- **Quite simply, products that cost more (short AND long term) than the value of any gains**

Sounds simple and straight-forward, doesn’t it? Yet there are many “balance”-promoting products which simply don’t add up. If you’re an extremely wealthy farmer and can afford to indulge yourself, then you can ignore this area. But if you need to make every crop count, then for goodness sakes do the sums! Look at the additional costs. Subtract any savings in reduced fertilisers (if there ARE any.....and if there are not, be very wary!). Then factor in the additional expected returns due to greater yields and quality. ARE you going to be better off? If not, why do it?

What to do next?

Compare any new products or services (or the ones you’re using now) according to these 7 areas. Ask the questions. And think laterally; Will/does this product or method help me to achieve what I really want out of farming?

And please look into the products and services that BioFarm Agricultural has to offer, and hopefully we can offer you something genuinely beneficial.

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