



Organic Matters Foundation Soil School™



Organic Matters Foundation

Sustainable Education – Empowering Communities



Organic Matters Foundation gives South Pacific farmers a viable, sustainable alternative to chemical agriculture – one that delivers benefits directly to them and their families. We partner with South Pacific groups and individuals to deliver introductory and advanced Soil School™ training programs that directly address local needs and challenges. Together we create culturally appropriate learning experiences that transfers biological farming practices, soil health education and sustainable farming to those most in need.

Everything we do at Organic Matters Foundation is underpinned by the belief that investing in people, strengthening communities and protecting the environment goes hand-in-hand. By giving the people in greatest need, access to information we take for granted, we empower them to make more informed choices and in doing so help themselves, their community and the environment.

Rising sea levels, erosion, increased flooding and drought, more intense and frequent tropical cyclones – these destructive events are forcing people to move from traditional coastal farmlands to less suitable, hilly island interiors.

Farmers are increasingly reliant on expensive chemical fertilisers and pest control inputs, which not only damage the environment and future farming potential of the land, but also take money away from family necessities and children's education. We particularly encourage the involvement of younger students and women so the next generation continues on the path to sustainable production.

Our solution is to help the environment and the people at the same time, by providing communities with viable farming alternatives, on-the-ground education and ongoing support. This holistic governance and ongoing education approach ensures the benefits are reaped long-term and by the entire community, which in turn builds a more positive outlook and confidence for the future.

When you invest in people, and empower them to make well-informed choices, they are strengthened, their community is strengthened and the environment wins.

We improve the environment by assisting farmers to return balance to the local ecology.

How do we do this?

OMF partners with South Pacific farming and community groups opening their access to the necessary funding for community improvement projects, educational programs and ongoing support. We deliver training and tools customised to local needs and challenges. Our training focuses on giving farmers practical skills and easy-to-use tools that can be implemented quickly to produce immediate improvements. This encourages greater acceptance and use of sustainable alternatives to intensive chemical agriculture.

Soil School™

Soil School™, an initiative of Organic Matters Foundation, utilises tailored education packages to teach farmers a systematic framework of monitoring the soil and their crops. We highlight the need for farmers to see what a balanced soil, plant, farm and ecosystem looks like. The adaptation of the new framework into local villages and communities is an essential part of this program. The current format of Soil School™ offers oscillation between participant farm visits and the classroom, influencing the village community as a whole.



Advanced Soil School Student workbook are practical and provide a solid reference the farmer/student can take home.

In practical terms Soil School™ currently operates on a 12-week rotation alternating between introductory and advanced Soil School™ and 1:1 farm visits. The Soil School™ curriculum, both introductory and advanced, is a combination of classroom education, group work and practical field tasks.

The introductory Soil School™ includes a discussion on what is sustainable farming, farm ecosystems and how nature works, farm productivity and profit, practical farm management and planning (parts 1 and 2) and understanding farm inputs.

The advanced Soil School™ includes revision of the introductory course, chemistry of the soil, the biological workforce, energy of the soil system, the farm plan, input program building and farm input reference guides. All soil tests are coupled with an extensive program and written report developed alongside the farmers.

Also included is the hands on 1:1 farm soil support, which is invaluable in creating 'Soil School™ Champions'. The practical course content has been tailored to pacific island villages and communities to ensure the studies are easily adapted by these 'Champions', applied in the field and communicated to the village farming community.

The combination of both practicum and formal education blends well with the island demographic as farmers have the opportunity to test their own soil, learn on their own crops and directly relate their new skills to their own farms in their village and region. The Soil School™ current rotation model is flexible and can be easily integrated with current funding projects.



Students and teacher alike assist each other to understand the basics of soil chemistry

Soil School™

- Transfers practical skills that can be implemented at low cost or, where possible, for free
- Communicates in easily understood language, how to achieve balance in the agricultural system – to balance the soil to be fertile and nutritious, to activate healthy biology in the soil and plant, and to balance the plant to make best use of available resources
- Provides simple and inexpensive tools that can be used on a daily basis (such as soil testing kits)
- Includes practical demonstrations of the methods and their benefits
- Improves the whole agricultural process from crop growing to animal husbandry, farm management and soil / water care
- Uses engaging and easy-to-use course materials and education aids (such as group work and flip cards) that can be referred to daily to reinforce learning and share information with others
- Introduces education and hands-on involvement to ensure continuing knowledge and development of sustainable farming practices in future generations.

Who are we?

Michael Smith (Dip. Org Ag)

Principal and Educator, Organic Matters Foundation

Michael has been involved in organic and sustainable farming for over 25 years. With extensive experience with returning non-productive soils back into profitable systems, Michael is the Principal and founding member of Organic Matters Foundation. Michael's qualifications in Organic Agriculture, and his training as a SFI soil biology advisor, enhance his current studies in the Bachelor of Ecological Agriculture.

A practical educator and gentleman, Michael's gifts are his energy and ability to relate to all people. This allows Michael to provide hands-on knowledge of soil farming systems by a farmer - to the farmers. Michael promotes a real time understanding of beneficial soil microbes as the basis of a holistic management system. He has taught across Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific.

Cheryl Smith – Managing Director, Organic Matters Foundation

Cheryl has also been involved in sustainable agriculture for the last 25 years in management and farm operation. Having completed her Permaculture Design Course, her passion for all things sustainable is reflected in the classroom and on the participant farms. Cheryl's skills in communication provide a clear insight into the foundation's intention and goal within the Pacific.

Cheryl has an inclusive leadership style that reflects through all levels of operation within the foundation. Cheryl is responsible for writing the Foundation's education material and the general management of the Foundation's needs.

Achievements to date

Organic Matters Foundation Soil School™ and the unique education packages have brought great success amongst farmers, in particular on Taveuni Island, northeast Fiji. We have commenced our expansion into Samoa and the Cook Islands. We have held our first introductory Soil Schools™ in both these countries.

To date, over 300 farmers in remote village communities have attended both the introductory and advanced Soil Schools™ across three countries. Over 60 individual soil tests have been conducted with programs provided advising farmers on farming initiatives, planning and soil nutrient requirements to balance their soil and manage their crops.

Improvements to date include:

- Crop improvements sighted have been increases in yield and quality in the Taro on farm.
- Increases in sequestered soil carbon
- Empowerment to farmers who are taking control of their farming operations. For example farmers are now questioning the use of high cost chemical fertilisers, application rates and understanding their options.

The future of Organic Matters Foundation

Following the success of our Soil School™ on Fiji's Taveuni Island, OMF is now working alongside reputable organisations such as TuTu Rural Training Centre on Taveuni Island and this year we will provide Soil School™ for their young farmers and young couples program.

We have also commenced Soil School™ in the Cook Islands following an initial project analysis in September 2011 to ascertain the farming needs in this community. In December 2011, 36 farmers attended the four-day program.

Enquiries for Soil School™ have been received from Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Africa.



Grass roots farming connection is an essential element to Soil School. Farmers meet with their teacher on their farms to talk about their challenges and find solutions. This is Inosi. He is a commercial Dalo farmer in Central Taveuni Island.



Meet Maria, mother of 7 children, grandmother of 13. She supports 4 of her children and grandchildren on her 5-acre farm with Dalo and eggplant crops. Planning her farm and improving her soil is key to her sustainable future.

What do we need?

Organic Matters Foundation is seeking funding of up to \$500,000 AUD to continue operation for the next two years. This funding will not only enable us to continue and expand our program into countries such as Tuvalu, Tonga and Kirribati. We will also continue our current programs in Samoa and the Cook Island groups. These countries have expressed a keen interest in hosting more Soil Schools™ and financial support for OMF will facilitate this process.

Also, the funding will be used to publish a Soil School™ Text Book for farmers to use when at the school and on their farms. This text is essential for farmers to utilise and understand the principals of healthy soil management and a reference tool when the classes are completed.

None of this would be possible without funding from Individuals, international governments, organisations and charitable bodies. The majority of these sources require that projects in the South Pacific region are conducted through an Australian or international non-government organisation (NGO) with responsibility for managing finances, monitoring progress and reporting outcomes.

By partnering with South Pacific groups we open their access to the necessary funding for community improvement projects, educational programs and ongoing support.

We look forward to hearing from you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Michael Smith', is positioned above the printed name and title.

Michael Smith Dip Ag (Org)
Principal
Organic Matters Foundation