

BULGARIA – NEONICS SUNFLOWER / ALBENA

- Contact details

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- A picture of the farmer + a quote

According to Albena, “Monocultures destroy the humus layer of the soil and ruin the land. There needs to be more crop diversification, which brings more biodiversity to the field. It is not impossible to cultivate cereals without neonicotinoids – my other colleagues and I are doing it. There are already 6000 organic farmers in Bulgaria – more than 500 of them are cereal producers and do not use neonicotinoids. This means that this shift towards agriculture with less or no pesticides is possible.”

- A brief description of the farm and farmers: size, production, date of settlement, number of associates and workers

Albena has been working in the agricultural sector since 1999.

In total – 275 ha (cereals, vegetables and vines) of which: 70 ha organic arable lands; 30 ha organic vineyards; 100 ha feed for chicken; 60 ha feed for pigs; 15 ha feed for cows. The cereals are sold for export or for processing in Bulgaria; some vegetables are processed for the Bulgarian market; some of the meat is sold at farmers’ markets; wine is also sold at farmers’ markets or through other short-chain delivery options. The farm is looking to expand its exports.

There are 19 permanent employees; it also employs 50-80 on a seasonal basis (eg for ploughing, harvesting and pruning the vines, which require more labour than arable crops). One person is needed for the sunflowers – for the spring sowing with the tractor, then ploughing twice and harvesting.

- A brief description of the agro-ecological practice

- Organic production of sunflowers – without pesticides or seed treatment. Crop rotation is mandatory – Albena does it every 5 years; rotation is done with 5 different crops; for example: 8 years of alfalfa, then 1 year of sunflower; 1 year wheat; 1 year barley or another type of cereal
- Pollination is very important for good yields too, which is why there are beehives (belonging to another farmer) near the field
- Organic production restores the field’s biodiversity and this helps improve the status of the soil and maintain acceptable yields levels

- Technical information on this agro-ecological practice with details and pictures

- This particular sunflower field is going to do very well in terms of yields because the pre-crop was alfalfa, which is great for green fertilization
- It might be necessary sometimes to use organic fertilizers such as foliar feeding – amino acids that feed the leaves of the plants
- One of the crops in the crop rotation must be a protein-type crop because of its nitrogen-fixation characteristics
- It is very difficult to find seeds in Bulgaria that have not been coated, but when you do, they are also cheaper; unfortunately, there is not much choice between different varieties

- The seeds can sometimes be treated with copper sulphate (bluestone), which is allowed in organic agriculture; it can help preserve them if seeds are planted earlier in the year, while the weather is still colder; seeds are decontaminated with water and bluestone
- When parts of the sunflower fields are affected by pests, they can be re-seeded with new seeds; the newer plants are also good for the pollinators because they flower later than the others and this provides pollen and nectar for the bees and other pollinators
- It is advisable to seed the sunflowers more densely than advised in conventional agriculture – this helps with controlling pests in the soil such as weevils

- Economical information on this practice: what does it cost to do that, what does it brings?

- Organic sunflower yields can reach up to 25 kg/ha (between 20-25 kg/ha). The price is twice as high as conventional sunflowers – approx. 0.25 EUR (0.5BGN) for conventional and 0.57-0.60 EUR (1-1.20 BGN) per kg for organic.
- Foliar feeding can cost something between 0.10-0.20 EUR/ha.
- Extra cost can be incurred if it is necessary to re-seed some parts of the field; the costs will depend on the seeds that are used; usually seed prices are determined on the basis of the amount of land to be seeded.

In the farmer's opinion, cultivating cereals without synthetic pesticides (including neonicotinoids) makes both environmental and economic sense due to the higher price and because the range of modern ecological measures make it feasible and successful. This is possible thanks to the opportunities that are provided by cooperation with other farmers and businesses. Albena's sunflowers for instance are sent to a factory, where they are made into sunflower oil. The Organic Farmers' Association in Bulgaria, where Albena is one of the founders, has been very successful in terms of uniting organic farmers and promoting organic agriculture.