

SLOVAKIA – NEONICS FRUITS / LUDO VASS

Contact

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Your photo and quote

“Healthy land, healthy food, healthy people all motivate me. Agrochemicals have no role to play if I want to get satisfaction from my work. And without satisfying work, you can’t get sweet fruit from life or healthy apples on a tree.”

Your farm

- Size – extensively farmed, grazed orchard of 20 hectares
- Production – depends on the year, yields are impossible to forecast, this year has been weaker, I expect 40-50 tonnes of apples

We are planting additional trees in our orchard, including apples, pears, plums, cherries, rowan berries and service trees. Young trees from traditional and regional varieties are grown from seed on vigorous rootstocks.

In the future we are planning to grow a broad spectrum of fruit varieties. As of now, though, we have no human or financial capacity, or ambition, to process our produce in-house. We offer our fruit fresh and the apple varieties we sell are suitable for long-term storage in cellars.

At present the orchard contains several walnut trees and winter pears in addition to apple trees.

- Established – 2013
- No employees: the organisation is based on volunteers

Brief summary of ecological farming practices

How have you replaced neonicotinoids at your farm? What method or practice do you use?

- Mature, producing trees are not sprayed and we do not use any other artificial pest or disease control on the trees in our orchard. In the first years after planting we remove aphids and pear suckers from young trees mechanically or treat the saplings with home-made plant extracts.
- In the orchard we try to promote food and shelter opportunities for the biological predators of pests. Grazing by farm animals in the orchard also indirectly contributes to reducing apple scab.

How would you describe the advantages and disadvantages of this method? How much does it cost?

- The advantages include low cost, a healthy and pleasant work environment and independence from the chemical industry. Through our labour, ancient species bear fruit without any chemical residues, which pleases the senses through its original taste – and is good for our health.

- The disadvantages are an unpredictable yield and the occurrence of pests and diseases. We have not yet applied any chemical treatments in our orchard and we are not planning to do so in the future.

During a more humid summer, fungal diseases become a problem, attacking the fruit and leaves of apple and pear trees.

Apple scab, powdery mildew and brown rot damage the fruit and leaves. These can be reduced by keeping the foliage well-thinned and airy and by regular grazing of the grass in the orchard (just one regular grazing of the whole orchard at the end of the summer - otherwise animals are used for grazing in small parts of the orchard when necessary). Other measures are too labour intensive, costly or inefficient in an extensively farmed orchard of fruit trees like ours.

The design of the orchard approximates a natural agroecosystem and strives to achieve environmental stability. It combines pasture and shelter for farm animals with free-growing orchard trees carrying unobstructed, airy crowns. Currently there are over 90 varieties of apples and more than 40 varieties of pears (some of the trees are very young so their production is quite low). The original species of apples consist of around 11 varieties. By selecting the appropriate combination of varieties suitable to local conditions with mechanical foliage care (winter pruning), adequate density of farm animals and an allowance for biodiversity we attempt to foster a harmonious agroecosystem, capable of mitigating the stress factors of climate, disease and pests.

Such natural agricultural ecosystems do not guarantee 100% yield every year and their fruit is not always picture-perfect. On the other hand, they have the advantage of sustainable farming without introducing foreign substances into either the ecosystem or the fruit which we want to keep clean and healthy.

This is a traditional model of farming which makes use of modern knowledge about eco-agriculture and environmental protection.