“WE WORK **WITH LIVING CREATURES**”

Małgorzata

runs a farm in central Poland. Together with her father, she manages 700 hectares of land, applying the principles of integrated crop production.

I STUDIED AGRICULTURE in Warsaw, and today I run my own farm while also supporting other family farms as the person responsible for quality systems. In total, we cultivate 700 hectares. My role includes managing the entire crop certification process as part of integrated plant production, a system that uses as little chemicals as possible, combining various prevention methods. Together with my father and family, we run the farms. We sometimes have different opinions and ideas about the development and management of the farms, but frequent discussions allow us to make collective decisions. We grow many species: apples, cherries, wheat, barley, corn, sunflowers... We know that every year, one of these crops will not be profitable, but thanks to diversity, we always maintain a stable income. We took our first steps in integrated production in 2015, in orchards, because my parents have been part of a group of producers who wanted to sell high-quality fruit without pesticide residues for a long time. Therefore, the group committed its members to switch to this system. For example, we use bacteria to control apple tree pests or insects that destroy those that are harmful to crops. As a result, the use of insecticides in orchards has decreased by about 20%.

Today, all our crops are grown using this system, with the exception of rapeseed, where it is difficult to achieve satisfactory yields with less pesticide use. An additional motivation was the possibility of receiving subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy.

We are always aware that we work with and for living creatures. Soil and plants are alive. That is why, before we resort to fertilisers or pesticides, we think about this twice in order not to destroy the life we want to protect. The idea is to tend to the land in every possible way. We could use chemicals anytime and anywhere without hesitation, but then the land we leave to our children would be dead. Yields are important, but soil health is even more important. We work with future generations in mind.

For example, we have introduced the use of more natural agents, such as bacteria that limit the growth of fungi. In combination with crop rotation, we have reduced the use of fungicides on rapeseed and sunflowers by 30%.

Crop rotation is key. If we only sowed wheat and rapeseed on the same field, we would still be using the same pesticides, especially with fewer and fewer active substances approved for use. Over time, weeds, insects and fungi would become resistant. That would be dangerous. However, when I grow rapeseed, maize, soya, sunflowers and then wheat in succession, the pressure from diseases and pests is different, and the soil works differently. That is why I am constantly learning new things. I search for information on the Internet and ask scientists who work closely with us. Advisors from phytosanitary companies also come to present new solutions: bacteria, biopreparations. But I always check it myself. I ask for laboratory test results. If a company does not want to disclose them, it is not for me. If they show them openly, it is a good sign.

The hills of Ponidzie in spring, Poland, 2018.
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The biggest difficulty remains the availability and price of natural preparations, for example against certain wheat diseases. Sometimes they are too expensive or not yet approved for marketing.

I believe that without chemicals it will not be possible to obtain satisfactory chemical-free crops, but at the same time we must minimise their use and develop alternatives. This is why educational programmes are needed to encourage other farmers to follow suit. We need to show that the decisions we make today regarding soil and plants will have consequences in 5 or 10 years' time. I am not an environmental activist; I believe that without chemicals we will not achieve satisfactory yields. However, I know that chemicals cannot be used indiscriminately. Of course, we want to earn a living, that's normal. But we also have to think about the future. If all chemicals stop working because weeds or insects become resistant, agriculture will collapse.

The reduction in the number of active substances authorised for use in agriculture also contributes to plant resistance. When there are few of them, crop rotation between treatments cannot be used, which accelerates the process of pathogen resistance.

Therefore, farmers, gardeners, everyone who cultivates the land and uses plant protection products and fertilisers, as well as those who create laws regulating their use and agricultural practices, should think about future generations. Most professional farmers are aware of this. The question is whether those who are involved in creating new laws and restrictions have this knowledge...

Conversation with HÉLÈNE SEINGIER

Illustration Stéphane Trapier