

HOF TOLLE

Good Practice Collection



Introduction

The farm is run by Nils, Marius, Markus and Tim – four friends who took over the farm from Nils' parents that have led it as a part-time farm for several decades before. The new team partly works outside the farm but the goal is for the farm to be a full-time job for all of them one day. Their motivation is to invent, shape and live the agriculture of tomorrow and the conviction that a sustainable and fair food system is possible.

Nils holds a MSc. in Organic Agriculture in Food Systems, Marius is a constructional engineer, Markus is a roofer, and Tim is an industry mechanic. This blend of practical experience and academic knowledge is incredibly valuable for managing a diverse farm with multiple areas of production. Paired with their genuine enjoyment of working outdoors and a creative approach to developing new farm products, it forms the foundation for the thriving of Hof Tolle in a new generation.

The Farm

The farm has been in the family Tolle for several generations and has been certified organic since 1996. It is a 60 ha-mixed farm consisting of 45 ha arable land and 15 ha grassland. Arable crops like spelt, barley, oats, soy and chickpeas are grown in diverse crop rotations with minimal soil disturbance.

On the grassland, a herd of suckler cows is raised extensively and without feed concentrate. The meat is marketed locally after a scheme where the meat of a whole animal has to be sold before it goes to slaughter. An agroforestry system has been established in 2024 on one of the fields to grow tree crops including nuts and berries intercropped with different arable crops.

A market garden was started in 2021 to expand the product portfolio and strengthen local food security. On 0,12 ha over 40 varieties of vegetables are grown, including many local and old varieties, and marketed in a subscription system that delivers weekly vegetable boxes. Finally, the farm houses horses for local leisure riders in a modern stable including horse care.

The Location

Hof Tolle is located in a small village with about 1000 inhabitants close to the city of Kassel with about 200.000 inhabitants. It lies in the Central German Uplands at around 300 m a.s.l.. The average annual temperature is 8–9°C and average precipitation is 750 mm/year, even though there was a series of drier-than-average years in 2018–2022. The fields are located on the leeward side of a mountain range and thus are especially prone to drought.

Agricultural regeneration objectives

Hof Tolle has a holistic view on regenerative farming, taking the whole farm and its economic, social and environmental sustainability into account. This leads to the high diversity of activities and products on the farm, contributing to local food sovereignty. Organic is the baseline for the wide variety of regenerative practices that are implemented on-farm: minimal tillage in the arable production, rotational grazing on the grassland, intensive organic vegetable production in the market garden for efficient use of land, amongst others. The farm has also run several extensive sustainability analyses through research projects and continuously analyses material fluxes to close nutrients loops on-farm, as well as improve their ecosystem services.



Best Practice Focus

Market gardening is an intensive, small-scale horticultural production system focused on high-yield, diverse crop output per unit of land. The market garden at Hof Tolle is 0,12ha large and partly sheltered through greenhouses. Irrigation is possible in the whole garden to ensure timely development of the produce and independence from local weather, as droughts have been a major limiting factor in recent years.

In market gardening, succession planting, intercropping, and biointensive techniques are prioritized to maximize the output from limited land. Mostly, hand tools or light machinery are used to reduce soil compaction and increase precision. Soil fertility is built and maintained through composting, green manures, and minimal tillage practices. Market gardens generally focus on short supply chains - optimizing freshness and reducing carbon emissions. Subscription boxes require meticulous harvest scheduling, crop diversity, and customer-oriented packaging and logistics systems.

Financial aspects of regenerative measure implementation – challenges faced

The start investment can be as low as 1.000€ if land is available and the market garden can easily be scaled up with time. It only occupies a small amount of land (low opportunity costs) and the main investment is time and work. Higher investments will be necessary if production is complemented by greenhouse production or irrigation. In total there is a low risk for the implementation of a market garden, as the land can be converted back to arable production, and an active market for used tools and tunnels exists in case these have to be sold again.

However, overall it is a knowledge and labour-intensive system as learning and implementation will take up a high amount of time. Depending on the system and scale, labour-cost can constitute 75-90% of the overall costs. Also, the market garden is dependent on direct-marketing channels due to higher prices compared to conventional vegetable production. It is economically viable due to high-value crops, premium pricing for organic quality, and reduced intermediary costs. Finally, it is also an innovative system that is interesting for integrating new people in the farm business in order to reduce workload.

Main Slogan

“We the future”

Categorisation, keywords

Vegetables, small-scale, direct marketing, subscription boxes, intensive cropping, greenhouse, irrigation, high-value crop, organic



Advantages and disadvantages

Advantages	Quite independent from weather.
	High output on a small area.
	Low investment needs.
	Educational value about local & seasonal food for customers.
Disadvantages	High input of manual labor.
	Most output during summer months, less in winter.
	Risk of crop failure.

Learning points

- Learning how the Market Garden concept works: there are a lot of courses, books and online resources about it. E.g. <https://themarketgardener.com/>
- Forming a stable local customer base

References/Bibliography

- <https://hof-tolle.de/>

Contact details

info@hof-tolle.de

Hof Tolle

Richardsweg 1

34379 Calden-Fürstenwald





Regenerative Agricultural Practices for Environmental Rejuvenation and Sustainable Ecosystems on European Farms



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Project number: 2024-1-CZ01-KA220-VET-000254669

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



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