

## SWITCHING TO ORGANIC FARMING FOR BETTER HEALTH AND INCOME

**A**nong Soncha is a member of Rak Si Thep Cooperative located in Si Thep District, Phetchabun Province. She turned her back on sugarcane monocropping – a family business that she knew of all her life – and started organic vegetable farming after witnessing the success of her daughter, Rotjana Soncha, and young generation of Rak Si Thep Cooperative supplying organic vegetable to the expanding market.



Soil deterioration, prevalence of chemical pesticide and price fluctuation of sugarcane monocropping are among concerns of young generation who returned to the countryside to take up their family's farming business. So they decided on organic vegetable farming.

“We want to grow food that is safe for our own consumption, as simple as that,” Natthawan Thongkled, a former banker, discusses the motivation to start organic farming. “Now the older generation also joins our initiative. They stop using chemicals, as we have access to a good and stable market for our organic produce,” Rotjana adds.

Finding market, as it turned out, was as difficult as cutting back chemical usage, but Rak Si Thep Group never stopped looking for new markets for their products. Through the help of the local administrative office, Rak Si Thep Group was introduced to the modern trade sector, opening up their new market which led to the establishment of Rak Si Thep Cooperative in mid-2017 with approximately 100 members, 10 of which are organic farmers. “Modern trade is a high-quality market and offers a good price,” Rotjana says.

At first, the cooperative did not have its own packaging facility. They had to transport their produce to the nearby packaging facility located 170 km away. “It eroded our profit, but it had to be done in order to gain access to this promising new market,” Rotjana explains. Their early products include waxy corns, eggplants and banana supplying to



Tops Supermarket, a supermarket chain owned by Central Group.

Nowadays, the cooperative has a cultivated area of 200 rai (32 ha) that meets GAP codes - growing cherry tomatoes, waxy corns, sweet corns, chili, okra, and etc. - and its own packaging facility. Despite having an established outlet for their produce, the cooperative continues to upgrade their knowledge and technology to improve their production. Through the training organized by NSTDA, these growers were able to learn proper cultivation techniques, enabling the improvement in quality and productivity. With the training on tomato cultivation provided by Prof. Dr. Suchila Techawongstien of Khon Kaen University, Anong is able to increase the seed-usage efficiency by 66%, whereas the training on corn cultivation by Asst. Prof. Bhalang Suriharn of Khon Kaen University enables Sumalee Paekekatoke to triple her corn productivity. Apart from cultivation techniques, knowledge on other topics such as vermicomposting, new varieties of tomato and corn, and plastic-film greenhouse were introduced.

It has been two years since the establishment of the cooperative with reliable market and migration from chemical farming. These growers are satisfied with increased earnings and better health, and always welcome new knowledge and innovations to improve their products.

**AGRITEC-NSTDA and Central Group established a program to enhance the capacity of farmers in Phetchabun Province who supply farm produce to Central Group to meet acceptable standards. Participating in the program are farmers of Rak Si Thep Cooperative in Si Thep District, Nam Duk Tai Vegetable Production Cooperative in Lom Sak District and Nam Nao Agriculture Cooperative in Nam Nao District. The program includes vocational training for villagers in Ban Na Sa-ngung Village in Lom Kao District who are faced with farmland limitation.**

