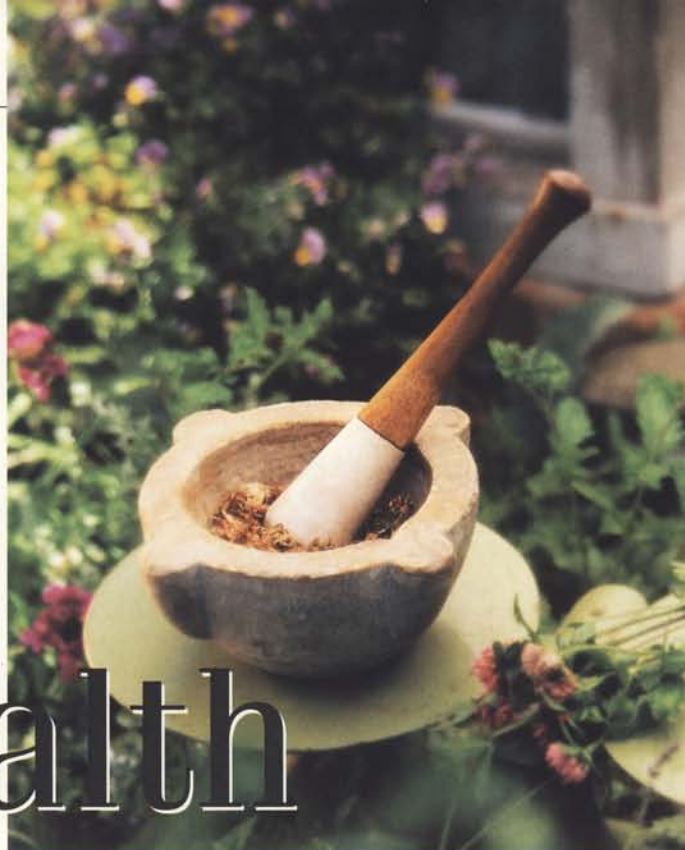


Food supplements, nutritional oils, green foods and plant remedies are an emerging organic sector. **Jennifer Britt** checks it out.

# our very good health



**T**he organic industry is back in pioneer territory when it comes to health products, particularly vitamin and mineral supplements.

In comparison, herbals are reasonably straightforward.

That is not to say that the Soil Association committee drafting new health products standards for plant medicines and supplements (and also skin-hair-body care) due to go out for consultation imminently has not had to wrestle with some difficult questions. It is envisaged that in time these private standards will feed into European legislation.

But in food supplements, which the committee has yet to grapple with, the ethical and technical terrain will become more rugged.

And that's without even venturing into the debate about whether the whole concept of nutritional supplements is compatible with the philosophy of organic foods.

Obviously synthesised nutrients are non-starters. But technological

developments which eventually could make conventional vitamin and mineral production look dated, will open up the possibility to more and more effective "naturally-smart pills", providing nutrients from concentrated foodstuffs... or possibly clean-process extracts of the nutritionally active ingredients of foods.

## An organic probiotic?

Then there are things like probiotics or B vitamins. If they are produced in an organic substrate can they be called organic?

The European organic regulation was not designed to encompass food supplements, so reinterpreting it logically and consistently to meet new possibilities will require painstaking thinking among the certifiers and standards setters.

"We are breaking new ground here," says the man on whose desk these tricky questions often land, SA standards and technical director Francis Blake.

On the other side of the

certification bench is Angus Flood, ex of Solgar who has spent two years developing a health products company, Sage Nutritionals (see News page 5).

He has looked at the future of VMS (vitamin and mineral supplements) and predicts it will increasingly be organic, certainly from the middle market upwards. Right now he says Sage is at the cutting edge of this new natural nutrition age.

The company already has two SA approved herbal products, a standard and higher strength St John's Wort. Vitamin-mineral products in the range are not currently approved, but Flood is confident that they will be.

One stumbling block has been minerals. "Our original formulations were using the cleanest, highest quality versions of advanced chelates, but the SA wouldn't certify them," says Flood. "So as part of product development we are fully committed to be entirely 100% reliant on food sources, not isolates, extractions or chemicals."

## Herbal matters

Bioforce, the Swiss herbal medicine company, has had organic herbals since before most people had even heard of the O word. Organic cultivation remains a core principle of the 40-year-old business, but Bioforce has not opted for certification in the UK for its finished products.

Other people in the natural medicines business also work in the organic spirit and use organic material but are not convinced that certification is always appropriate.

Julian Barnard of the Herefordshire flower remedy company Healing Herbs makes his products with organic brandy. Also essential to quality is that the flowers, too, should come from a pristine environment.

When he explored the possibility of certification, however, he was told by the certifying body (not the SA) that picking a few perfect blooms from the wild was not acceptable when certified farmed product was available.

## Live issues

**Genetic modification:** GM technology has crept relentlessly during the past few years into the manufacture of certain food supplements, says Cheryl Thallon of Viridian, which avoids using soya oil and other key 'villains', but does not claim to be Non-GM. "For us the real issue is what happens in the fields. We don't believe it is morally supportable to claim GM-free because there are no traceable amounts of GM

proteins left in the finished product, if the fields are still growing acre upon acre of GM crops."

**Homeopathy:** Weleda UK grows many of the herbs for its anthroposophic and homeopathic remedies in its own Demeter-certified garden. But the company's Roger Barsby does question whether in homeopathy, organic certification is meaningful when no molecules of the plant

material are left in the finished product. In any case Weleda, whose products are licensed medicines, can still not obtain the grade of pure alcohol required by the Medicines Control Agency.

**Fair trade:** The Organic Herb Trading Company has already established an equitable marketing structure and sustainable programme for the collection of

devil's claw plant in Namibia, south west Africa. New projects will be in Eastern Europe, Malawi and Zambia.

**Spirulina and seaweed:** Although the Soil Association has been certifying products made from ingredients harvested from the sea and lakes, the EC regulation does not recognise them as organic. The SA is lobbying for change.

The SA's wildcrafting standards developed since then do accommodate this approach to the making of flower remedies, but Barnard's priority would still be "the need of the remedies rather than the generalised requirements of organic certification".

### Growing demand

G&G, the East Grinstead company, the only SA-certified manufacturer of encapsulated herbs, is expanding steadily as a contract supplier for a number of brands, including its own of course.

Most of its 15 products, including echinacea, ginkgo, garlic, ginger root, peppermint leaf, saw palmetto, and St John's Wort, are produced under the 70% rather than the 95% rule (% refers to how much material is organic) so the description organically-grown can be used, but the product itself cannot be called organic.

Another company with a herbal supplement range is Nature's Store.

"It's a cracking little range," says Richard Starkey marketing manager, speaking of the company's Nature's Organic brand.

Sue Losson at Green People is convinced that organic herbals will come even more into their own as people realise the

difference that growing organically makes. "We get people who have tried organic herbs telling us that they have much more life in them," she says.

Gaye Donaldson, chairman of the SA health products standards committee, is marketing director of the Organic Herb Trading Company. The Somerset business supplies 500 herbs (most of them medicinal, though the volume business is in the culinary varieties) and is also a tincture manufacturer.


Organic herbals, she believes, be they in capsule, traditional infusion, tincture or other form, will forge ahead as more and more consumers realise that not all herbs are intrinsically "organic" and that growing methods do make a difference.

### Global perspective

Viridian is another company committed to using organic material wherever possible and it has a certified green food blend and nutritional hemp and flax oils.

Its herbal supplements are a mix of organic whole herb (on the principle that all parts of the herb contribute to its effect) and standardised extract of the active components, which cannot be certified... not currently anyway.

Does Viridian director Cheryl Thallon believe that using organic herbs in health products makes a major impact in environmental terms?

"Definitely," she says. "The herbal industry is big now — big enough to worry about the effect on the planet of harvesting all this stuff." 

### North West frontiers

Howbarrow Organic Herbs is a Cumbrian farm-based venture producing Soil Association certified tinctures and sun extracted plant oils.

Processing of the herbs after harvesting in the late summer and autumn is started within 10 to 15 minutes of picking, using a big hand blender to chop the plants before steeping in alcohol and water.

Picking between 10am and 1pm is ideal when the hormones are in the highest part of the plant. Farmer Julia Sayburn sees the potential for applying more biodynamic thinking. "It would not be difficult to do because we are

on quite a small scale."

A little further south in Merseyside are two hundred Soil Association certified-acres on four farms dedicated to cultivating medicinal and aromatic plants from botanically-authenticated root stock. The plants are German chamomile, Roman chamomile, peppermint and lavender which, says project director Dr Jane Collins, "is a very fine, delicate product. English lavender is highly prized". There is on-farm extraction and laboratory analysis with the oils marketed through the Phytobotanica company.

### Healthy developments

- NHR, a long established name in organic essential oils, is now certified by the Soil Association.
- Seagreens which makes supplements and table condiments from wild wrack, rich in vitamin, mineral, trace elements and amino acids, harvested from the arctic Norwegian coast is now supplying a Demeter-certified bakery, Artisan Breads of Whitstable in Kent, with seaweed to use in its products.
- Sales in the UK of Udo's Choice, the nutritional oil blend launched six years ago to raise profile of vegetarian sources of omega 3 essential fatty acids, have virtually doubled since last year when Carol Vorderman mentioned the product

on her video, *The 28-day Detox Diet*. Omega-3 EFAs are active chemical s and deteriorate quickly, so the oils are cold pressed in a light-free, oxygen-free environment, shipped chilled to the UK and then kept frozen until despatch to retailers.

- Granovita has bought a German company which makes essential oils and has introduced an organic tea tree oil under the Vitapharma brand.
- Arkopharma, the French phytotherapy company, has new additions to its range of alcohol-free organic fruit juice-flavoured liquid plant extracts manufactured by a high-tech maceration-pressing process. They are Echinacea, Ginkgo, Dandelion and Great Burdock.

- IHLEVital is a new range of organic supplements from Germany, cereal yeast with acerola cherry tablets, a vegetable probiotic concentrate and prebiotic syrup. Capital Health is the UK distributor.
- Don Dennis who distributes flower remedies through his International Flower Essence Repertoire company, also makes his own Living Tree Orchid Essences using organic brandy.
- Organic Blue is a new range of organic oils being launched soon by London-based company Health Quest.
- Organic Oil Company oils from Kiotech are sourced from individually identified farmers from all continents and corners of the globe.



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