

History...

...of Seaweed and Chase Organics

The history of Chase Organics and our involvement in agriculture stretches back nearly a century to 1912, with seaweed extraction becoming a significant part of the story in the early 1960's. The link between farming and seaweed, however, reaches much further back in time.

The first records of seaweed being processed come from China in 2700 BC, with Europeans coming into the market rather belatedly in the 12th century. In the UK, the agricultural use of seaweed was first restricted to bulk fresh weed as a manure and soil conditioner but as transport and labour costs rose, raw seaweed was replaced by processed meal, and in the 1950's a method for converting it into a liquid extract was developed.

Chase Organics – A colourful history in organic agriculture

Chase was first established in 1912 by Major L.H. Chase, an engineer, who built the Mersey Transporter Bridge in 1905 over the river Mersey between Widnes and Runcorn near Liverpool. He began selling cloches he had originally designed to protect his lettuces from the 'dirt and soot' of the city.

He later moved to Pond House in Chertsey, Surrey, historically a town whose economy was based on agriculture and market gardening. This made the perfect location to set up his Cloche business and he stayed there through most of the war. Chase became quite a large organisation employing hundreds of people manufacturing the trademark cloches that were sold all over the world.

A surprising fact unknown to many people is that during the Second World War, Chase came up with the famous slogan 'Dig for Victory' which the government took over. They also had the slogan 'Cloches v Hitler' which didn't catch on!

Major Chase died during the Second World War and the business was then handed over to his son, Jocelyn, (J.L.H. Chase) who was one of the founder members of the Soil Association. He wrote two books 'Cloche Gardening' and 'Commercial Cloche Gardening'.

In the 1940's, the inventor of 'Quick Return' (Q.R.) compost activator, Miss Maye Bruce was been looking for a 'Soil-conscious corporation' to take over QR production. By chance and good fortune, Jocelyn visited Miss Bruce after he had seen the effects on the compost on his garden. In time, Chase would make 7000 tons of compost a year using the Q.R. method in large open heaps ready for distribution onto the crops. At one time, Q.R. compost powder was sold by virtually every ironmonger and horticultural establishment in England, and still has a faithful following today.

In these times, the Chase establishment at Chertsey was a centre of excellence for organic horticulture with trial fields, seed cultivation and a market garden. The estate was visited by thousands of people including representatives from the House of Commons (in 1946), the Minister of Supply and labour MP's.

Several different types of Cloche were made including a tomato cloche which was 24" (60cm) high and used to grow tomatoes and grape vines. They also made a basic, single ridge, tent cloche specifically for and sold by Woolworths,

After the war, Chase were approached by the government to provide help for the re-inhabitation of the Alderney in the Channel Islands, since the island had been evacuated and turned into a prisoner of war camp. There were crops of asparagus, melons, strawberries, radishes and flowers, some of which were grown under cloches. The horticultural trade from Alderney continued to thrive until the early sixties, exporting produce and flowers to UK markets.

Chase also grew and processed their own seeds, in particular lettuce, produced in Alderney. They also had a seed grower in Essex but the majority was grown at the Grange in Chertsey. The first Chase mail order catalogue was published in 1945 and is still going strong as The Organic Gardening Catalogue, published in partnership with Garden Organic since 1993.

Seaweed washes into Chase

Up until the 1950's, the cloche's had been the main business. Jocelyn had other ideas and went into seaweed after Ron Silver, MD at the time, had seen the benefits of its use in Jersey. Chase started producing seaweed extract in the early '60s and the company became Chase Organics. As processed seaweed is much simpler for farmers to use, the business grew, even though post-war commercial agriculture made heavy use of chemical fertilizers. (Today of course we recognise the folly of feeding the plant, instead of feeding the soil and the damage caused by conventional farming.)

Ron Silver eventually took over the seed business from Jocelyn, and employed a young graduate, Mike Hedges – now Chase Organics' Managing Director - to develop the seed business in Benhall, Suffolk. Sometimes Lady Eve Balfour (co-founder of the Soil Association) would visit to buy her seeds. On one occasion, Mike recalls, she marched in waving her walking stick, demanding to know why they had stopped selling the variety of seed that she had been growing for the last few years!

Jocelyn was a wonderful ambassador of organic horticulture but he was not such a good business man and he ended spending much of his time abroad. He retired in 1984 after selling the company to Ian Allan Group and died a couple of years later.

Richard Rixson held the post of MD from the early 1980's, until 2004, and he now concentrates his energies on sales of SM6 to distributors and commercial growers. Mike Hedges has continued to enhance and develop the seaweed business alongside The Organic Gardening Catalogue.

Over 40 years on, **SM6** has become an established brand and gained organic certification in the UK and overseas. The solid content of 30% and patented extraction method make it a superior and more economic product than other seaweed extracts. It is good to know that modern science has in recent times backed up what ancient farmers just understood through using seaweed, and that a natural, rather than chemical, product can make the vital difference to a successful agricultural business.

Seaweed Selection and Processing for Agriculture

Not all seaweeds are the same, 'brown' weeds are selected by Chase for extraction but even these differ in their characteristics. In the 1960's Chase Organics chose a unique aqueous extraction process and the first product made was **SM3**, sold to gardeners then as '**Sea Magic**' with 15% soluble seaweed solids, and a more concentrated version, **SM6**, with 30% pure seaweed solids has been developed for the commercial market.

The seaweed varieties used by Chase Organics originate around the Atlantic shores of the British Isles where seaweed has been harvested for generations. Nowadays it is treated as a renewable resource and the weed is cut by hand taking care that about 15cm of stalk is left for re-growth. This means it can be harvested every four years without endangering its survival.

The cut weed is bound in nets and at high tide floated to the closest beach or slipway for transportation to a nearby factory. Here it is washed to remove sand, stones etc and chopped prior to drying. Temperatures are monitored to avoid overcooking and degradation. Traditionally, much of the seaweed has been converted into alginates that are widely used in products for human consumption. Within the agricultural field, extract manufacturers will use a coarse size grade, whereas for animal feed supplements it will be significantly finer.

The dried seaweed meal is now shipped to a factory in the east of England where it is converted into the liquid extract. A gentle aqueous process is used, with no high pressure or corrosive extraction chemicals that can best be compared with coffee percolation! The liquid is then concentrated by evaporation to the required level of soluble solids. Nothing is added apart from some food grade preservative to maintain stability. It is this natural characteristic that has enabled Chase Seaweed Extracts to be approved for use on organic crops by the relevant bodies in the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Spain.

Our thanks to Andrew E Davenport for allowing us to use part of his research into the history of Chase Organics and QR compost making, further details of which are revealed in the forthcoming book, 'Quick Return Compost Making – The Essence of the Sustainable Organic Garden'.