



Finding new in the old

Reviving former links between forest and agricultural land

Innovation usually makes us think of new ideas, something ground breaking and never done before. But innovation can also come about when we develop previous methods or revive a technique that has long been forgotten. Abonos Lourido is a company that produces organic potting soil and fertilisers in Galicia (Spain) which drew inspiration from former farming techniques for forest and agricultural land. It led them not only to come up with many new entrepreneurial ideas, but it also contributed to preventing forest fires as well as reducing the use of chemical fertilisers by reinstating the natural nutrient cycle.

Changing times

Forty years ago, Galician farmers used the shrubs that grew in the nearby forests on their farmland for feeding cattle, producing manure and fertilising the soil. But the industrialisation of agriculture significantly changed practices. The arrival of chemical fertilisers meant that the farmers no longer needed to use the forest shrubs as a resource. So with the undergrowth left to get out of hand and climate change bringing hotter and dryer summers, this set the perfect conditions for forest fires. The fires that swept through the region of Galicia in the summer of 2006 devastated around 6.5% of the woodland in the region.



The forest floor shrubs are *Ulex europaeus* (Gorse- image above) and *Cytisus spp*

Rediscovering the good old days

In 1990s, Ramón Lourido, a farmer in this same region, had a goat farm with two other associates. The herd grazed on the forest land but was struggling to feed in such a thick overgrown forest undergrowth. The solution? Cutting back the shrubs to make the area more accessible to the goats and allowing other plants to grow that they could eat more easily. Ramón had to chop down the shrubs regularly and so was suddenly left with a large, constant amount of forest biomass and he recalled the former methods used in the region. He already sold goat manure (which he also had plenty of) and so he was inspired to mix the chopped biomass with the goat droppings to produce compost. In 1996, Ramón Lourido created the **enterprise "Abonos Lourido"** to sell the products that he had developed from the available material: an organic fertiliser, soil for potted plants and an organic product to improve soil mixtures.

The innovative idea meant that a farming resource which had lost its former importance and was even perceived as a problem was given back its value. Clearing the forest undergrowth not only inspired Ramón's business venture but it also improved forest management and thus prevented wild fires.

Innovation and adaptation



The beginnings of Abonos Lourido were difficult. There were few other composting enterprises in the region and the machinery they needed to harvest the biomass, process it and pack the final product was expensive and not easily available. So the owner of Abonos Lourido decided to carry out his own research to adapt the machinery he already had available. He also did his own experiments on composting the raw materials and developed the 3 main products that Abonos Lourido now commercialises.

The main customers of Abonos Lourido were initially ornamental plant nurseries, but they are declining with the difficult economic situation. Ramón Lourido is trying to counteract this drop in demand with more innovation. He has developed a grow-bag for cultivating vegetables (see image). This innovative product means that people who live in small flats in cities can still grow their own food.

Looking to research for support

Although Ramón is very proud of his innovative work, he believes that he could now benefit from the cooperation of a research centre. At the beginning, his creativity, curiosity and desire to develop innovative ideas meant that he did not consider looking for support from elsewhere, but he would now like to develop his company further. He is still looking for funding to make this possible.

He has already tried to get some funding, but stepped back because most of the available calls require co-funding which entails a high economic burden for a small enterprise. Furthermore, due to the economic crisis, there is less money available for innovation and there is more competition for the scarce opportunities, and so they are difficult to reach for a small company.

Despite a few drawbacks, Ramón's example shows that many challenges can be overcome with enthusiasm, creativity and innovation.

For more information: <http://abonoslourido.com/es/productos.html>