



Organic Farming

Converting your farm from conventional to organic-farming methods is an important decision. Learn what's involved on a yearly basis.

By Cherie Langlois

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Farmers planning to label their crops "organic" must adhere to the USDA's National Organic Program. At Terry's Berries organic community-supported agriculture (CSA) farm in Tacoma, Wash., diversity rules.

Visiting her organic farm on a mid-September day, tall sunflowers bow their golden heads, sweet cherry tomatoes dangle, a few pumpkins glow orange and tempting red-green apples are almost ready to pick.

What captivates me the most, however, are several lush and festive rows of salad greens: red kale, arugula, endive, chard and more.

Wandering inside Terry Ann Carkner's farm store, I find a big bowl brimming with mixed greens fresh from the field for about \$7 a pound. Money is no option: I want a salad made from bright, healthy fixings that don't come in a bag (and grow slime several days later) and I want it now.

I savor crisp, organic salad every day for nearly a week, sure that my body and the Earth are just a bit healthier for it.

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Many people believe organic farming cannot be done on a large scale and prefer to buy their organic food from the farm down the road rather than from the factory farm.

Apparently, I'm not alone in my cravings for organically farmed produce. According to the Organic Trade Association's (OTA) Web site, organic food sales grew 16.2 percent in 2005, reaching \$13.8 billion in consumer sales.

Fruit and vegetables accounted for 39 percent of this total, the largest portion of any food category. And judging from past growth, the future of organic foods looks bright: Since 1997, organic food sales have shown annual growth rates of around 15 to 21 percent.

Of course, this trend hasn't gone unnoticed by the supermarkets and club stores. Where once only natural food stores and farmer's markets carried organic, now everybody wants in on the act.

In fact, reports the OTA, about 46 percent of the total organic food dollar volume was sold through mass-market channels during 2005.

So what's the deal with organic crops? Are they truly better for consumers, for the environment and for small farmers? As a hobby farmer, should you jump aboard the certified organic wagon?

Before you make that leap, here's some (organic) food for thought.

Going Organic: Rewards & Challenges

With maximum production of monoculture crops as its goal, conventional commercial farming relies heavily on purchased "inputs" of synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.

Organic farmers shun these toxic and potentially carcinogenic inputs in favor of enhancing the soil with compost, manure, crop rotation and cover crops. They combat weeds with good, old-fashioned tilling rather than by applying herbicides, and they nurture diverse crops to reduce the need for pesticides. While these eco-friendly tactics take time and hard work, the



organic farmer usually has fewer outside expenses to recover.

Certified Organic: Standards & Regulations

Anyone who wants to label and represent their agricultural products as “certified organic” must abide by uniform standards and regulations laid out by the USDA National Organic Program.

Here’s a sampling of requirements. For lots more, head to www.ams.usda.gov/nop and click on “NOP regulations.”

205.103: A certified operation must maintain records concerning production, harvesting and handling of agriculture products that are to be sold, labeled or represented as “100% organic,” “organic” or “made with organic.”

205.202: The farm must be free of prohibited substances for a period of three years preceding harvest (check out the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances in this same document).

205.203: The producer must manage plant and animal materials to maintain organic matter content in a manner that doesn’t contribute to contamination of crops, soil and water ... Raw manure must be composted unless it’s applied to land used for a crop not intended for human consumption, or incorporated into the soil not less than 120 days prior to harvest of a product whose edible portion has direct contact with the soil (90 days prior to harvest if the edible portion does not have direct contact with the soil).

According to Bob Scowcroft, the Executive Director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz, Calif., farmers making the switch to organic receive a premium for certified organic products.

“The challenge is how to get there,” he says. “A farmer with 1,000 acres of beans and corn says ‘I want to go organic and sell to a grain buyer or wholesaler’ and the challenges get complex almost immediately.

He or she has to check the organic certification requirements and wade through 400 to 500 pages of organic regulations. In this country, you have very little information on how to make the transition to organic farming; it’s almost always farmer passing knowledge to farmer. A lot of organic growers are very open and willing to share with other growers—that’s unusual.”

Consider farmers Terry Ann Carkner and Diane Andersen, who are more than willing to share their experiences with organic farming, both the good and the bad.

When Carkner and her husband, Dick, bought their 20-acre property 22 years ago, the farm had been a conventional raspberry monoculture since the 1940s. Divided on the issue of going organic, the Carkners continued growing raspberries conventionally, finding it easy to employ synthetic chemicals and grow one crop, until organic foods became more popular about five years later.

“Cascadia Farms said they could use our berries for their organic jam if they were certified organic,” says Carkner. “Then the market for organic grew—that’s what nudged us over. Boy, I would never go back now. We’re into it philosophically and 90 percent of what we eat is organic. I think what’s good for the environment is good for us; we also think the flavor is better.”

For Carkner, growing organic meant diversifying; first by growing other types of berries, then, instead of letting the land lie fallow between berry rotations, planting a wide and colorful variety of vegetables.

Organic FYI

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service
(800) 346-9140

The Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA) site features excellent information and articles on



sustainable farming, the National Organic Program and organic certification.

Organic Farming Research Foundation
(831) 426-6606

This national public interest organization works to improve organic farming practices, sponsor research and educate the public about important organic farming issues. Visit their site to learn about projects they fund, see research results, and find information about organic production and marketing.

Organic Trade Association
(413) 774-7511

This membership-based business association promotes and protects the growth of organic trade. You'll find organic news and facts, information on organic standards, and more.

The National Organic Program

The official USDA National Organic Program site is packed with intimidating but essential information for farmers planning to become certified. You'll find a list of USDA-accredited certification agents, organic production and handling standards, the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances, and a question-and-answer section.

"We grow about every veggie you can grow," Carkner says. She also added a flock of laying chickens and began raising broilers. Now her fresh, certified-organic crops feed a successful CSA business with over 270 customers.

The biggest disadvantage to organic farming, in Carkner's opinion is the weeding (remember, no conventional herbicides are allowed).

But her favorite pay-off is worth the extra work: "When my grandkids visit, we can eat berries right off the vine and pull carrots out, give them a rinse and eat them, too," she says happily.

"I don't have to post signs that say 'Poison.' My CSA customers can come out to the farm and wander around with their kids, and I don't have to worry."

Halfway across the country, Diane and Dave Andersen's desire to raise their 12 children in the country led them to buy a 200-acre organic farm in Ottertail, Minn., 10 years ago.

They discovered the farmland needed "fixing up" as much as the house and outbuildings; they soon learned to replenish the soil with natural practices like manure application and summer fallowing of specific pieces of ground.

Today, the family's diversified organic operation encompasses crops such as wheat, rye, barley, corn, clover, flax and oats. A bountiful family garden yields peppers, tomatoes, broccoli and other treasures. Rounding out the farm operation, the Andersens' sell organic milk from their herd of Jersey cows, and organic brown eggs courtesy of their hens.

"We promote [organic farming] with our whole hearts," says Diane Andersen. "Psychologically, knowing that we aren't contributing to the chemical input and pollution of those around us gives us confidence. Environmentally, we enjoy the good life, the wildlife around us and knowing that those weeds flourishing out there provide homes for species who couldn't survive otherwise.

Being able to survive on these 200 acres without a lot of outside sourcing saves revenue and creates a strong work ethic in the minds and hearts of our children."

To Andersen, marketing their crops and products is the only downside to organic farming. "While that can be enjoyable in the social aspect, it can also be very challenging as you step into a world that understands little about the benefits of organic. The prevalent mindset is still 'spend as little as we can for as much as we can get.'"

Organic Certification & Maintenance

Farmers planning to label their crops "organic" must adhere to standards outlined in the USDA's National Organic Program.

If you sell more than \$5,000 worth of organic agricultural products a year, you must be certified by a USDA-accredited certification agency.

"Anyone who sells less than \$5,000 of products [each year] does not have to become certified—it's voluntary," stresses



Scowcroft. "However, you've got to keep records and follow the rules to use the term 'organically grown.'"

The road to organic certification begins with choosing a private or governmental USDA-accredited certifier and obtaining an application packet.

You'll submit an application, fee and an Organic System Plan packed with information about your property's agricultural history and your planned organic management practices. For example, how will you improve the soil and control pests? Where will you obtain seeds? How will you handle your harvest?

After your plan's review and assessment by the certifier, the next step involves an on-site inspection of your farm. An organic inspector reviews all aspects of your operation in order to determine whether your management plan complies with the National Organic Program standards.

Once the certifier reviews the inspector's report and determines your farm fits the bill, you'll be issued a certificate. The entire process usually takes around eight to 10 weeks.

At last you're free to sell—and label—your crops as certified organic.

That is, until the following year when you'll have to pretty much repeat the same process to maintain your certification. Feel overwhelmed yet?

When running a business, however, detailed planning and record-keeping can mean the difference between success and failure.

"Each year you have to make a farm plan as part of the certification process," explains Carkner. "The plan describes what your major weeds, pest problems and diseases are, and what you'll do to handle them. You have to keep a list of what you buy and put on your crops, and know where your compost comes from. I probably keep too detailed of records, but it's helped me grow my business."

"Becoming certified is not as big a deal as people seem to think," Andersen adds. "Our farm was organic when we bought it, so it was only a matter of researching and deciding on which certifier we wanted to go with. At that point, we needed to be sure we had a paper trail proving that our ground was organic, that the seed we bought to plant was organic, and that no chemicals or unapproved products were being used on our farm. We achieved organic certification with little problem, and only have to continue farming and living our lives organically to maintain this certification."

Why Certify?

Given the expense of certification (it varies considerably from certifier to certifier) and its challenges, why would a farmer who makes less than \$5,000 a year from his or her crops want to go the certified organic route?

For one, only with certification can you market your agricultural products under a USDA-certified organic seal. In a world where the chain of supply has grown ever longer, this seal assures customers that you've been inspected by a third-party certifier and that your growing methods comply with the organic standards outlined in the USDA's National Organic Program. Otherwise, they have only your word to go on that your product is truly organic.

There is a significant expense to being certified, Scowcroft admits.

He thinks certification is worth it, however: It shows you've made the commitment and provides security as part of your marketing.

"Your buyers can get your paperwork—the consumer's right to know how you grew something is codified in the audit trail."

The Giants Go Organic

To me, knowing how my luscious, eco-friendly salad was nurtured is only part of the allure of organic. I like that my salad came fresh from a farm a mere 15 miles away, so it didn't have to be transported across three states by a gas-guzzling truck. I like using my purchasing power to support an endangered species—small family farms like Terry's Berries. I don't mind paying more for quality organic produce that's priced to reflect the real costs of farming.

And that's why you won't see me shopping for organic produce at Wal-Mart.

According to a report released by Cornucopia Institute (www.cornucopia.org), an organic watchdog that promotes



economic justice for family-scale farming, Wal-Mart sources organic products from what are essentially factory farms, as well as from Third World countries. Small, organic farmers worry that this could lead to lower organic food quality and loosened standards. What's more, as giant corporations like Wal-Mart drive down organic food prices, small farmers could find their businesses threatened.

All this begs the question: Can a huge factory farm really be organic?

Carkner and Andersen don't think so.

"Organic farming cannot be done on a large scale," says Andersen, who feels optimistic that factory farms won't prevail.

"Educated people know and understand that foods grown in the outdoors and on the farm down the road is just what it is promoted to be. Who could trust the factory farm to provide a healthy product or for that product to be what they say it is? Integrity means so much. The factory farms may make an impact for a short while, but in the long run the small producers will still be there."

Is Organic Better ...

... for the environment and farm workers? Yes. "When you farm organically, you're not applying over 8,000 different chemicals to your crops," says Bob Scowcroft, Executive Director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. "You're not exposing farm workers to chemicals or contaminating ground water." Other environmental benefits: Organic practices build soil instead of eroding it, they save energy (in the manufacture of synthetic pesticides) and reduce water-polluting nitrogen run-off caused by the application of synthetic fertilizers.

Is organic better for our health and the health of our children? Probably, but more research--and funding—is needed. "I don't feel comfortable saying organic is healthier for you—yet," says Scowcroft. "But there is some intriguing research out there." Research has revealed lower pesticide residues in organic foods.

In one study, published in the February 2006 *Environmental Health Perspectives*, researchers substituted organic food for conventional in the diets of elementary school children for five days. Concentrations of organophosphorous pesticide metabolites in the childrens' urine decreased to nondetect levels immediately and stayed that way until they resumed a conventional diet.

Another study in 2003 by researchers at U.C. Davis found more natural antioxidants in organically grown berries and corn than in conventionally grown.

About the Author: Cherie Langlois is an HF contributing editor who runs a 5-acre hobby farm in Washington.

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