



Jody Padgham

Consumers are learning more about organically produced food everyday

# What is Organic Agriculture?

Many of us who sell at farmers' markets are often asked, "Is your (lamb, corn, cheese, chicken, melon, etc.) organic?" Consumers are learning more about organically produced food everyday, and are looking for it in growing numbers. Organic production may be a marketing option that would be a positive change for your operation.

If you ask a consumer what they expect from a product labeled "organic," they will probably tell you that it means no pesticides were used, that animals live outdoors comfortably, and no harsh medicines or chemicals are used to produce a finished product. In fact, the production of an organic product goes far beyond this basic description.

Organic agriculture is a system of crop and livestock production that promotes and enhances the health of agricultural ecosystems while producing healthy food. Organic agriculture uses diverse cultural and biological practices to control weeds and pests, build soil fertility, enhance biological cycles and increase biodiversity. (This is a synopsis of the definition for organic production from the *National Organic Program Final Rule*.)

The use of the term "organic" in agricultural production is now governed by the US Department of Agriculture. The Farm Bill of 1990 set up a mandate for a national definition of organic production, and it was finally put into place in October of 2002. What this means is that producers can only use the term "organic" if they can prove that they have abided by all of the practices laid out in the 45-page law (the National Organic Program (NOP)). Anyone who misuses this term and refers to their product as "organic" without full conformity to the regulations faces

prosecution and stiff fines. This strict regulation has been set up so that consumers can trust that certain practices have been followed (or avoided, in the case of antibiotics and pesticide use) when they see a product labeled as "organic."

## Organic production

Organic production systems emphasize active, knowledge-based management, on-farm resources and working with nature.

Organic production systems are designed to:

- Maximize biological activity in the soil
- Maintain long-term soil health and minimize soil erosion
- Enhance the genetic and biological system and its surroundings
- Provide livestock with optimal living conditions for health and well-being
- Recycle materials of plant and animal origin, return nutrients to the land, and minimize the use of nonrenewable resources
- Promote the environmentally responsible use of soil, water and air, and minimize agricultural pollution

While emphasizing the health of the agricultural ecosystem, organic agriculture prohibits the use of synthetic herbicides and pesticides, genetically modified organisms, synthetic fertilizers in crop production, and hormones and antibiotics in livestock production. In addition, federal organic rules prohibit the use of sewage sludge or irradiation.

Organic farmers must develop a high level of farm management skill, approach their farms as whole systems, and use a wide variety of resources to solve the problems they face.

For example, an organic farmer's first line of defense against crop pests might be to improve the fertility of the soil by using crop rotations, building organic matter, and incorporating cover crops. Second, beneficial organisms—including insects, birds, bats, and amphibians—are encouraged by improving and managing their habitat. As a last resort, an organic farmer might apply an approved biological or botanical pesticide (not a synthetic one).

Organic farmers use on-farm resources whenever possible. For example, they apply composted livestock manure and plow under legume crops to build nitrogen in the soil. Techniques to control weeds include mechanical cultivation, crop rotations, use of specific soil amendments and green manure crops.

Organic livestock consume organically grown feed ingredients. Farmers promote animal health through sound nutrition, pasture rotation, proper housing, minimal stress, and preventative health care practices.

## Organic certification

The Organic Foods Production Act requires planning, reporting and inspection that shows compliance with the NOP by a third party organization (a process known as *organic certification*) for a producer to claim that a product is organically produced.

Private certification agencies and state agriculture programs, accredited by the USDA, enforce organic production standards outlined in the NOP. Producers must document inputs, field and production activities, harvests and sales to verify compliance with the standards. Operations are inspected annually. To qualify for organic certification the first time, prohibited materials (including prohibited fertilizers, pesticides and genetically modified crops) must not have been applied to organic crops or the soil in which the crops are grown for a minimum of 36 months (3 years) prior to organic harvest. Only approved materials and practices may be used during this “transitional” time.

Those who sell less than \$5,000 worth of organic product in any given year will fall under the “small farm exemption” and are not required to be inspected by a third party certification agency. These farmers are, however, required to follow all of the rules laid out in the NOP, including the maintenance of all records documenting production practices.

## Marketing

Organic farmers have several marketing options. The upper Midwest is home to a number of organic marketing cooperatives for milk, grains, meat and vegetables. Some farmers sell to stores and restaurants, while others market through farmers’ markets or use other types of direct marketing.

Organic foods generally sell for higher prices than non-organic foods. This premium varies, depending on the kind of product. Organic farmers frequently receive a premium of between 15% to 40% above conventionally grown products. Those who are certified organic may use the national organic seal, or their own labeling using the word “certified organic” with the name of their certification agency to identify their products.

Those direct marketing their products can use brochures, signs or conversation to explain the “organic difference” to their customers. Some will identify the organic seal and how it sets you apart immediately; others will need education to understand why your product, which sells at a higher price, is different than the non-organic producer next door. A well-written brochure will really help your customers understand why they should support your farming practices.

According to the Organic Trade Association, the market for organic products has increased 20% per year for the past 15 years. With widespread demand for organic foods and increasing concern about GMOs, antibiotics and pesticide residues, the organic market is expected to continue to grow.



## Getting started

If you are interested in marketing organic products, you must first learn about the production practices encouraged and allowed in organic production. There are numerous written resources available from ATTRA (see resources) and MOSES to help you understand changes you will need to make. Attending conferences, pasture walks and field days will give you a clearer picture of organic production and allow you to meet others, ask questions and see whole farm systems that are run organically.

If you plan to be certified, you will want to contact a certification agency to get started on the paperwork necessary to apply for and maintain organic certification. Depending on the type of operation you have, you will generally want to manage your farm organically for two or three years before you actually fill out application paperwork. If you are planning on any marketing other than direct marketing, you will want to seek out a marketing agent or co-op long before you make the transition so that you comprehend the needs of the market to which you are selling.

The certification agency staff will help you to understand the paperwork that is needed to apply for and maintain certification, and can help you to understand what materials are allowed or not allowed for use in your organic production.

Once you apply for organic certification, an inspector will come out to your farm and look at all that you are doing there relating to your organic production. They will check all your farm records, and tour your fields and buildings. They will submit an inspection report to your certification agency, which determine whether you have complied with the National Organic Program rules. Once you have been granted certification, you may reapply each year to maintain your certified organic status.

## Resources

For more information on organic production or certification, see the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service website ([www.mosesorganic.org](http://www.mosesorganic.org)) or call the MOSES office at 715-772-3153.

Printed material to answer specific organic production or certification questions can be obtained from the National Sustainable Education Information Service—ATTRA at [www.attra.org](http://www.attra.org) or [www.ncat.org](http://www.ncat.org) or 800-346-9140.

The National Organic Program rule can be found at the NOP website, [www.ams.usda.gov/nop](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop) and a list of marketing organizations, certification agencies, resource groups and more can be found in the Upper Midwest Organic Resource Directory, available online at [www.mosesorganic.org/directory.htm](http://www.mosesorganic.org/directory.htm) or by calling MOSES at 715-772-3153.



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**Authors:** Jody Padgham is a member of the Emerging Agricultural Markets team and a farmer who works for Midwest Organic Sustainable and Education Services (MOSES).

Reviewed by Rami Reddy, UW-Extension direct marketing specialist, UW-Platteville; Rose Skora, community agriculture educator for Kenosha/Racine Counties; and Bill Wright, urban gardening coordinator for Brown County UW-Extension

*Direct Marketing in Wisconsin* is a project of the Cooperative Extension Emerging Agricultural Markets team. The team's work is supported in part by a USDA grant (Agricultural Entrepreneurship-Wisconsin). For more information on the team's work

and Wisconsin's new agricultural markets, visit [www.uwex.edu/ces/agmarkets](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/agmarkets).

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**What is Organic Agriculture? (A3811-8)**