

# Helping Farmers Successfully Grow and Market Organic Fruits and Vegetables

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## **Outline**

- Overview of National Organic Program Requirements
- Organic Certification Process
- Marketing Outlets
- Farmer Profiles
- Developing an Extension Program to Work with Organic Growers

## **Overview of National Organic Program Requirements**

*This section adapted from text by Jim Riddle, Organic Independents*

See <http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/organicoverview.html> for history and background on the National Organic Program.

“Organic production” is defined by the regulation as “a production system that is managed ... to respond to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.”

In simplified terms, the National Organic Standards require:

### **For crop farms:**

- 3 years (36 months prior to harvest) with no application of prohibited materials (no synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or GMOs) prior to certification
- distinct, defined boundaries for the operation
- implementation of an Organic System Plan, with proactive fertility systems; conservation measures; and environmentally sound manure, weed, disease, and pest management practices
- monitoring of the operation’s management practices
- use of natural inputs and/or approved synthetic substances on the National List, provided that proactive management practices are implemented prior to use of approved inputs

- no use of prohibited substances
- no use of genetically engineered organisms (GMOs), defined in the rule as "excluded methods"
- no sewage sludge or irradiation
- use of organic seeds, when commercially available (must not use seeds treated with prohibited synthetic materials, such as fungicides)
- use of organic seedlings for annual crops
- restrictions on the use of raw manure and compost
- must maintain or improve the physical, chemical, and biological condition of the soil, minimize soil erosion, and implement soil building crop rotations
- fertility management must not contaminate crops, soil, or water with plant nutrients, pathogens, heavy metals, or prohibited substances
- maintenance of buffer zones, depending on risk of contamination
- prevent commingling on split operations (the entire farm does not have to be converted to organic production, provided that sufficient measures are in place to segregate organic from non-organic crops and production inputs)
- no field burning to dispose of crop residues (may only burn to suppress disease or stimulate seed germination – flame weeding is allowed)
- no residues of prohibited substances exceeding 5% of the EPA tolerance (certifier may require residue analysis if there is reason to believe that a crop has come in contact with prohibited substances or was produced using GMOs).

*There are separate requirements for livestock operations and processing operations.*

All operations producing and/or selling organic products must keep records to verify compliance with the regulation. Such records must:

1. be adapted to the particular operation
2. fully disclose all activities and transactions of the certified operation in sufficient detail as to be readily understood and audited
3. be maintained for at least 5 years beyond their creation
4. be sufficient to demonstrate compliance with the regulation. The operator must make the records available for inspection

Organic System Plan forms are generally provided by certifying agents as part of the application process. The plans must be updated annually, and operators are required to notify their certifying agents of all changes to the operation which might affect the operation's certification status. Operations must be inspected at least annually.

All producers and handlers who sell over \$5,000/year in organic products must be certified. Producers and handlers who sell under \$5,000/year do not have to be certified, but they still have to follow the NOS. Non-certified organic producers can sell their products directly to customers or to retail stores, but their products cannot be used as organic ingredients by other operations, and they cannot use the "USDA Organic" seal.

Though the National Organic Standards are similar to previous organic standards, there are some significant differences, and there are areas of continued controversy, confusion, and clarification. Despite the level of detail in the NOS, some interpretation is required for local variations and new conditions. It is always a good idea to check with certification agencies to get your questions answered, especially before purchasing or applying materials.

## **Organic Certification Process**

See <http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/orgcertsteps.html>

### **General Requirements for Certification**

- Comply with the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 and the USDA National Organic Program Rules and Regulations
- Establish and implement an Organic Farm Plan
- Permit annual on-site inspection
- Maintain all records for 5 years
- Submit applicable fees to certifying agent
- Notify certifying agent immediately of any changes concerning drift or in the operation which may affect compliance

### **Step 1: Submit Application**

- a. Choose a certifying agent and request an Organic Farm Plan questionnaire. The certifying agent may ask questions to assess your eligibility and which Questionnaires are appropriate to fill out
- b. Read the Standards and Materials List carefully
- c. Complete the Organic Farm Plan Questionnaire, including farm maps and three year field history for crops planted and inputs applied, and other required records
- d. Submit completed Organic Farm Plan questionnaire, licensing agreements and fees to the certifying agent

**Note:** For help with your application, you may want to take a look at this Organic Farm Plan (<http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/orgfarmplan.pdf>). It's a mock certification application for a farm that was developed to be compliant with the National Organic Program (NOP) and is keyed to the proposed rule. This document can be used as a practice template before you receive an application from an accredited certifier.

### **Step 2: Certifying Agent Review**

Certifying agent reviews the Organic Farm Plan and accompanying documentation to ensure completeness and determine whether the applicant appears to comply. The

certifying agent also verifies information regarding any previous certifications, notification of noncompliance or denial of certification.

### **Step 3: On-site Inspection**

Preparing for an Organic Inspection: Steps and Checklists - ATTRA:  
[http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/organic\\_inspection.html](http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/organic_inspection.html)

- a. The certifying agent assigns an organic inspector
- b. The inspector calls the applicant to set up an appointment
- c. Depending on the complexity of the operation, the inspection may take 3-6 hours. Set aside time for the inspection
- d. The inspector needs to verify information from the Organic Farm Plan. He/she inspects fields, farm buildings and equipment, assesses contamination risks, fills out on-site inspection report, and gathers as much information as is needed to determine if your operation is in compliance. The inspector evaluates crop health and growth, soil tilth, fertility management program, pest and weed management strategies, and the operator's understanding and commitment to compliance. He/she also reviews records to insure monitoring and compliance
- e. The inspector may be authorized to take soil, tissue or product samples for analysis
- f. The inspector reviews identified non-compliance issues at the time of the inspection
- g. The inspector conducts an exit interview to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the inspector's observations and information gathered, address the need for additional information; and discuss issues of concern

### **Step 4: Inspection Report Submitted to Certifying Agent**

- a. The inspector completes a report based on the information gathered. He/she may need additional information from the operator or other sources to complete the report
- b. The inspector does not make the certification decision, but identifies noncompliance issues with regard to organic standards
- c. The inspection report, the Organic Farm Plan, and all associated paperwork are sent to the certifying agent

### **Step 5: Notification of Certification**

- a. A Certification Committee or Review Committee reviews the Organic Farm Plan, the inspection report, and all associated documentation
- b. If the certifying agent determines compliance in all procedures and activities, the applicant is granted certification. A certificate of organic operation is issued
- c. If the certifying agent determines any minor noncompliances, the applicant has the opportunity to correct these noncompliances as a condition of certification
- d. Once certified, an operation's organic certification continues until withdrawn, suspended, or revoked

## **Denial of Certification**

- a. The certifying agent must provide an applicant with written notification of noncompliance with the date by which the correction must be accomplished, and any documentation necessary to support correction. The applicant may rebut in writing any noncompliances identified by the certifying agent
- b. When a correction is not possible, a notification of noncompliance and notification of denial of certification is provided to the applicant. This notification is also provided to the USDA National Organic Program Administrator
- c. The applicant may re-apply for certification or request mediation with the certifying agent
- d. The applicant may file an appeal of the denial of certification to the USDA National Organic Program Administrator
- e. If the certifying agent has reason to believe that the applicant has made false statements or otherwise misrepresented compliance, the certifying agent may deny certification simultaneously with issuance of notification of noncompliance

## **Continuation of Certification**

- a. To continue organic certification, a certified operator must:
- b. Pay annual certification fees
- c. Submit updated organic farm plan, detailing changes from the previous year
- d. Submit update on correction of minor noncompliances previously identified by the certifying agent
- e. Submit other information as deemed necessary
- f. Have annual on-site inspection
- g. Complete certifying agent review of updated Organic Farm Plan and inspection report, with issuance of updated certification of organic operation

## **Suspension or Revocation of Certification**

- a. When rebuttal or correction of the noncompliance is not completed within the prescribed time period, the certifying agent shall send the certified operation a written notification of proposed suspension or revocation. It shall state the reasons, the proposed date of suspension or revocation, the impact on the future eligibility for certification, and the right to request mediation or file an appeal
- b. The operator has 30 days to request mediation or file an appeal
- c. If mediation or appeal is successful, certification is reinstated. If the mediation or appeal is unsuccessful, certification is revoked
- d. Revoked operations are not eligible for certification for five years
- e. If the certified operator has signed a licensing agreement to the use the certifying agent's seal, the certifying agent can directly suspend or revoke the operator's right to use the seal

## **Violations of the USDA's National Organic Program**

Any operator who makes a false statement or knowingly sells or labels a product as organic that is not in accordance with the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 or the NOP Rules may be subject to criminal prosecution and fined up to \$10,000 per violation.

### **Organic Certification Guide on Growing Small Farms Website**

<http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/orgcertguide.html>

*Let's spend a few minutes looking at these on the website:*

- Resources for Understanding and Complying with the National Organic Standards
- Organic Certification Process
- How to Pick a Certifier
- Guide to U.S. Organic Certifiers - The New Farm
- Comparison of Three Organic Certifying Agencies Used by NC Growers
- Required Recordkeeping for Certified Organic Farms
- National Organic Program: Program Standards
- National Organic Program: National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances
- Web Resources for Organic Certification

## **Marketing Outlets for Organic Growers**

### **Market Opportunities**

- Retail
- Wholesale
- Restaurants and Institutions
- Others?

### **Retail – direct market**

- Farmers' markets
- Community Supported Agriculture
- On-farm stands, PYO

*Growing Small Farms Website:*

*See section on **Community Supported Agriculture** at*

*<http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/csa.html>; includes *CSA Resource Guide for Farmers**

## **Wholesale**

- Chain grocery stores
- Upscale independent grocery stores and co-ops
- Growers' cooperatives

*Growing Small Farms Website:*

*See section on **Marketing to Independent Retailers** at*

*<http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/marketingretailers.html>*

## **Restaurants and Institutions**

- Local restaurants
- Universities
- Schools
- Museums
- Hospitals and other institutions

*Growing Small Farms Website:*

*See section on **Marketing to Restaurants** at*

*<http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/marketingrestaurants.html>*

## **Farmer Profiles**

Just for fun, let's look at a few North Carolina organic farmers...

### **Developing an Extension Program for Organic Production**

#### **Chatham County**

- Population ~50,000 with a 26% growth rate from 1990-2000
- Major development pressure from north and east
- 2002 Ag Census: 1,128 farms; approx. 90% of these are "small farms"

#### **Chatham's Small Farms**

- The number of farms in Chatham County is growing, contributing to economic development and positive quality of life for residents
- Much of this growth can be attributed to the increase in small farms owned by first generation farmers
- These diverse operations practice sustainable agriculture and most market directly to consumers
- Most farming <5 acres (but own more)

- Growing diverse mixture of vegetables, herbs, cut flowers, small fruits, small-scale livestock
- Alternative enterprises include pastured poultry, goat dairies, Asian vegetables, agritourism, value-added production
- Marketing at farmers' markets, restaurants, on-farm stands, community supported agriculture

### **Cooperative Extension's Sustainable Agriculture Position**

- Position created in 1992 to meet special needs of organic farmers
- NC's first "organic agriculture agent" position
- I started in February 2001

### **My Main Outreach Tools**

- Enhancing Sustainability Workshops
- Plow Sharing Newsletter
- Growing Small Farms Website
- On-farm Research
- Individual Consultation

### **Enhancing Sustainability Workshops**

- 39 workshops held since fall 2001
- 2,370 participants
- Sample of topics:
  - Cut Flower Production
  - Sustainable Soil Management
  - Tax and Labor Issues for Small Farmers
  - Marketing to Restaurants & Retailers
  - Beneficial Insects
  - Organic Pest Management
  - Pastured Poultry Production
  - Crop Rotation
  - Hands-on Pest ID
  - Postharvest Handling
  - Acidified Foods School
  - Organic Disease Management
  - Compost Teas
  - Community Supported Agriculture
  - Season Extension
  - Micro-irrigation

- *A full listing of workshops can be found on the GSF website at <http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/workshops.html>*

### **Demonstrations & Field Days**

- Sheep shearing
- Blueberry pruning
- Cover crops
- Season extension

### **Farmer to Farmer Mentoring**

- Farmer Listservs – small farms, pastured poultry, beekeeping, etc.
- Formal Mentoring Program – season-long on-farm cut flower training

### **Plow Sharing Newsletter**

- Bi-monthly publication
- Topics include organic production, pest management, marketing, upcoming programs, sustainable ag news, and much more
- Mailed to 1,400 subscribers in Chatham and surrounding counties
- Posted to web

### **Growing Small Farms Website**

- <http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms>
- Created in January 2002
- Now has ~300 pages
- 100,000 visits and 4.6 million hits in 2005
- For farmers, gardeners, agricultural educators, researchers, and consumers
- Major sections:
  - Local Crop Problems
  - Farm Profiles
  - Web Resources
  - Local Farmers' Markets
  - Community Supported Agriculture
  - Buy Local Guide
  - Grower Resource List
  - Cover Crops
  - Farmer Listservs
  - Farm Photo of the Week

- Season Extension
- Organic Pest Management
- Marketing Tips
- Pastured Poultry
- Organic Certification Guide
- Calendar of Events

### **Grant-funded On-farm Research**

- Biological control of the Mexican bean beetle
- Beneficial insect habitat on organic farms

### **Individual Consultation**

- Farm visits
- Office visits
- Emails
- Phone calls
- Listservs

### **Tips for Building/Strengthening Your Organic Program**

- Identify and connect with your target audience – visit local farmers’ markets, etc.; develop an email and snail mail database
- Conduct needs assessment survey – keep it simple
- Invest in proactive programming, and hopefully this will help reduce need for reactive efforts
- Determine appropriate types of delivery methods to reach this audience – workshops, newsletter, website, email, etc. – and find out when they will come for programs (month, time of day, etc.)
- Plan program – start small, build reputation and contacts, bring in other experts as needed
- Know and use your strengths: Research? Writing? Teaching? One-on-one? Photography? Web Design? Curriculum development?
- Collaborate with others – agents, specialists, community college, NGOs
- Team up with successful farmers to do programs

- Market your program AND your farmers – flyers, press releases, newspaper, email, website, other agents, direct mail, business cards, brochures
- Add value to the program – provide a high quality program, give them a nice notebook or folder of handouts and supplemental readings, provide refreshments, and charge them!
- Create an appealing atmosphere for workshops - Chatham county workshops have become a great meeting place, strengthening the sense of community and networking among farmers; they learn lots of things and get vital support and camaraderie – great for agents too!
- Always leave them with a way to learn more – resource lists
- Don't forget about educating non-farming public – Buy Local Guide, farm photos, farm profiles, farmers' markets
- Watch for trends and anticipate needs – if you get a lot of questions about the same thing, it might be time to develop an educational tool or program! Examples: organic certification guide, pastured poultry conference
- Maximize your impacts – if you are spending time helping one farmer with a problem or recommendation, how can others benefit? Examples: listservs, local crop problems
- Evaluate your programs and tweak as necessary – post-workshop evaluations, follow-up surveys, on-line evaluations
- Professional development: always be looking for opportunities to improve your knowledge and skills – organic production, pest management, web design, digital photography, farm business management, etc. – and explore grant opportunities to help with programs and equipment; attend organic conferences (e.g., SSAWG) to learn and network
- Most of all, enjoy what you are doing and **HAVE FUN!** This is a wonderful audience to work with – very passionate, dedicated, self-motivated, enthusiastic, and appreciative of your help!

**Thank You and Good Luck!**