ORGANIC FARMING: Questions, Answers, Resources

Organic agriculture has been one of the fastest growing segments of the agriculture industry for a number of years. The purpose of this brochure is to provide basic answers to questions you may have about organic farming practices and to provide resources where you can find additional information. Most of this information was obtained from the Minnesota Guide to Organic Certification by the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA), but it also applies to organic agriculture in other states. You can read the entire report at: http://www.misa.umn.edu/vd/organic.pdf

What is organic agriculture?
The USDA – National Organic Program (NOP) defines organic agriculture 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.” The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture says, organic agriculture “generally refers to a farm production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity to promote healthy crops without the use of synthetic chemicals (meaning synthetic pesticides - herbicides, insecticides, etc. - and synthetic fertilizers).” In short, organic agriculture is a system of farm and processing practices, not simply the resulting plant and animal products.

Why change to organic agriculture?
Organic production is not for everyone, but there are many reasons to consider changing to organic production. They include: premium prices for organic products, improved soil and water quality associated with diversified cropping systems, reduced use of synthetic chemical inputs, reduced handling of potentially hazardous agricultural chemicals, and potential increased profits through reduced use of off-farm (purchased) inputs.

What do you have to do to become organic?
Producers and processors who sell over $5,000 per year of organic products must be certified by an accredited certification agency in order to sell their products as “organic.” Certification is a process of review and approval of a production system by an organic certification agency, after which a producer is able to call his or her product “organic” or “certified organic.” There is a transitional period of three years during which no forbidden chemicals or fertilizers can be
applied. Genetically modified organisms are also prohibited along with numerous other products. A certification agency can provide a complete list of prohibited materials.

**How do you find a certification agency?**

Producers and handlers may contract with any USDA-accredited certifier, no matter where its office is located.

- For Minnesota producers, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture has a list of certifiers active in Minnesota along with their contact information at this website: [www.mda.state.mn.us/news/publications/food/organicgrowing/usdaaccredited.pdf](http://www.mda.state.mn.us/news/publications/food/organicgrowing/usdaaccredited.pdf)
- For Iowa producers, the Iowa Department of Agriculture is accredited by the USDA’s National Organic Program (NOP) to certify all aspects of the organic food chain. [http://www.iowaagriculture.gov/AgDiversification/organicCertification.asp](http://www.iowaagriculture.gov/AgDiversification/organicCertification.asp)
  Other certifying agencies in Iowa can be found at the following website: [http://extension.agron.iastate.edu/organicag/certagencies.html](http://extension.agron.iastate.edu/organicag/certagencies.html)

Cost of certification varies between agencies and with the size of your operation so be sure to shop around to find the best certifier for your circumstances.

**Where can I find more help or support?**

A good place to start is your local county extension office. They should be able to answer many of your questions or point you toward someone who can. Additionally, listed below are several government agencies, universities, and private groups and that have websites where you can find current information.

**University Information Websites:**

- **Iowa State University - Organic Agriculture Program:**
  ISU operates an Organic Agriculture Program to provide research information and extension presentations for Iowa citizens. Field Days, workshops and classes on organics are held throughout the year.
  Contact: Dr. Kathleen Delate, Associate Professor  
  Dept. of Horticulture & Agronomy  
  106 Horticulture Hall  
  Ames, Iowa 50011-1100  
  Telephone: 515-294-7069 Fax: 515-294-0730  
  Email: kdelate@iastate.edu  
  [http://extension.agron.iastate.edu/organicag/](http://extension.agron.iastate.edu/organicag/)

- **University of Minnesota - Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA)**
  Mailing address: 411 Borlaug Hall  
  1991 Buford Circle  
  St. Paul, MN 55108-1013  
  Telephone: (800) 909- 6472 Fax: (612) 625-1268  
  Email: misamail@umn.ed  
  [http://www.misa.umn.edu/home.html](http://www.misa.umn.edu/home.html)
• U of MN Southwest Research and Outreach Center (SWROC)
  Mailing address: 23669 130th Street
  Lamberton, MN 56152
  Telephone: (507) 752-7372  Fax:(507) 752-5097 FAX
  http://swroc.cfans.umn.edu/
  http://organicecology.umn.edu/

• Michigan State University Organic Farm Exchange
  http://michiganorganic.msu.edu/

State and Federal Government Information Websites:
• USDA National Organic Program (NOP)
  http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/NOP
• USDA Organic Production
• USDA Alternative Farming Systems Information Center (AFSIC)
• Minnesota Department of Agriculture
  www.mda.state.mn.us/food/organic
• Iowa Department of Agriculture
  http://www.iowaagriculture.gov/AgDiversification/organicCertification.asp
• Organic Farming Resources for Wisconsin
  http://www.organic.wisc.edu/
• North Dakota Organic Farming
  http://www.ndorganics.nd.gov/

Certifying Agencies (inclusion on this list does not imply an endorsement by Albert Lea Seed):
• Minnesota Crop Improvement Association
  www.mncia.org
• Midwest Organic Services Association, Inc. (MOSA)
  www.mosaorganic.org
• Organic Crop Improvement Association – MN Chapter (OCIA)
  www.mnocia.org
• OneCert
  www.onecert.net/default.htm

Other Useful Information
• University of Minnesota – Organic Ecology
  http://organicecology.umn.edu/
• Minnesota Organic Network
  http://organicecology.umn.edu/?page_id=51
• The Minnesota Organic Farmers' Information Exchange (MOFIE)
  http://mofie.cfans.umn.edu/
• Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Service (MOSES)
  www.mosesorganic.org/
• National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (ATTRA)
  http://attra.ncat.org/
• The Organic Agriculture Information website
  www.organicaginfo.org
• Organic Trade Association (OTA)
  www.ota.com/organic.html

• Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
  http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/index.htm
• The Rodale Institute
  http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/
• How To Go Organic
  howtogoorganic.com
• The Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI)
  www.omri.org
• eOrganic
  http://eorganic.info/
• Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society
  http://www.npsas.org/
• Practical Farmers of Iowa
  http://www.practicalfarmers.org/