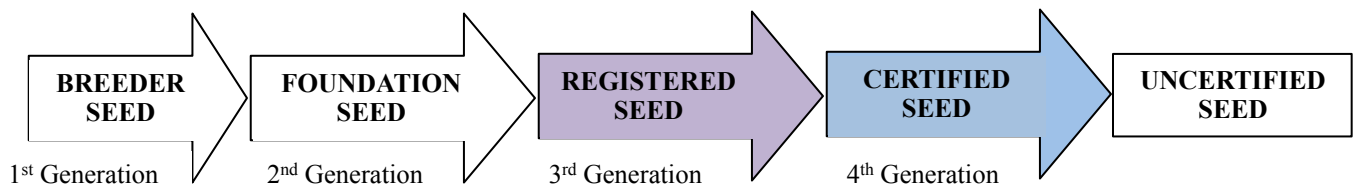


Certified Blue Tag Seed vs. Certified Organic Seed

Certified Seed, Certified Organic Seed, Uncertified Seed... Anyone who buys and plants seed has probably heard these terms before but it seems that the term “Certified” has created some confusion for growers and with organic growers in particular because it has come to have two meanings. It is important to know the differences in the ways the term is used so you know what you are buying.

Certified Blue Tag Seed

Until about ten years ago when the term “Certified Seed” was used, it had to do with plant breeding and, more specifically, with how many generations removed the seed was from its pure variety status. When plant breeders develop a new variety, they produce what is called “Breeder Seed.” Each subsequent generation of seed produced is potentially less genetically pure and is given a different seed class designation. The flow chart below illustrates the various seed classes:



The definition of Certified Seed as taken from the terminology of the Association of Official Seed Certifying Agencies (AOSCA) is: “*Certified seed shall be the progeny of Breeder, Foundation, or Registered seed so handled as to maintain satisfactory genetic purity and identity, and which has been acceptable to the certifying agency.*”

When someone buys Certified Seed, they know they are getting seed that has met specific production and purity requirements set by law. The fields are inspected by a third party organization that verifies the seed source and stand purity. After the seed is harvested and cleaned, a sample is sent to a certified seed lab for purity and germination analysis. Only seed that passes all necessary requirements can be labeled with a blue certified seed tag and is a buyer’s guarantee of the integrity of the seed. If it does not have a blue tag, it is not “Certified Seed.” Additionally, some varieties of seed can only be sold as Certified Seed.

Certified Organic Seed

When used by the organic community, the term “Certified Organic” has a meaning completely unrelated to the one discussed above. While “Certified Organic” is used to describe seed, it is also used to describe many other types of products ranging from fresh fruits and vegetables to processed foods to livestock feed. When a product is labeled as “Certified Organic” and/or carries the “USDA Organic” symbol, it certifies that the product has been grown or produced following the standards set forth by the USDA National Organic Program (NOP). To insure the integrity of the “Certified Organic” label, organic producers and handlers are subject to annual inspections by independent third-party organizations that are approved by the USDA National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). The organic inspectors verify that the crops or other products are, among other things, “produced without using most conventional pesticides; fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; or ionizing radiation.” (For specific information and definitions related to the NOP go to: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/ofp/ofp.shtml>).

Why the Confusion?

Confusion often arises when growers aren’t aware that there are two different meanings to the term. To complicate matters, there is often overlap with these terms. In other words, it is possible to have certified organic seed that is not blue tag certified (organic uncertified) just as it is possible to have blue tag certified seed that is not certified organic (conventional certified). Likewise, it is possible to have seed that is both blue tag certified and certified organic (organic certified) or it could be neither (conventional uncertified).

So, why should a grower be concerned about the difference between the two meanings of “certified”? In general, it depends on the grower’s production system, the variety of seed being planted, and the end use of the grain produced.

NOP standards require that certified organic growers plant only certified organic seed if it is available. Legally, seed that is labeled “USDA Organic” must have the appropriate inspections and paper trail to ensure that it meets all NOP standards. Growers can lose their organic certification if they cannot document the organic integrity of their seed and production methods. It is the responsibility of the grower to find a source of organic seed if it is available and provide proof of its organic status. The grower should always look for the “USDA Organic” symbol and/or the words “Certified Organic” on the seed tag or packaging to verify that the seed is organically grown and processed. If there is any question about the seed, the supplier should be able to provide all necessary paperwork for the seed.

For conventional growers, using certified organic seed is not only unnecessary but also a bad idea from an economic standpoint since certified organic seed is usually more expensive than conventional seed. This added expense is usually offset for certified organic growers because certified organic crops usually receive an added premium when sold.

The decision of whether to purchase blue tag Certified Seed, which affects both conventional and organic growers, should be based on the crop and variety being planted. Sometimes “Certified Seed” costs more than uncertified seed because it costs more to produce due to inspection costs and some varieties have license fees attached to them. In these circumstances, an uncertified seed may work just fine. However, many newer certified varieties have improved traits for better disease tolerance, lodging resistance, test weight, higher yields,

etc., and may be worth any added cost. Uncertified seed may contain more “off-types” which means it may contain other types of seed (i.e., barley in oats, etc.). This is often not a problem but could be in some circumstances if purity is an issue.

To conclude, when growers see the word “certified” on a seed tag or bag, they need to pay attention to what they are buying. It will not only verify the quality of the seed being purchased but can also prevent potential problems down the road.