

COMMODITY

ORGANIC PRODUCTION

Description

Organic farming is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony.

It's About the Soil

The concept that soil is a living system is fundamental to the principles of organic farming. Organic farmers believe there is an essential link between the health of the soil, the health of plants, the health of animals and ultimately, the health of human populations. Thus the restoration, maintenance and enhancement of soil life is the cornerstone of the organic method.

There are More Do's than Don'ts

Though often characterized by what can't be used, such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, organic farming is more dependent on active improvements, such as crop rotations and green manure crops. Simply removing agrochemical inputs is not enough to turn a conventional farm into an organic farm. Dynamic organic practices, which improve the biological activity of the soil and the environment, must be undertaken.

Most organic farmers pay careful attention to composting. Quality compost is teeming with soil life. It is the essential soil organisms that are important to organic farms, rather than just the commonly used crop nutrients. Green manure crops - growing a crop (clover, buckwheat or rye, for example) in order to plough it into the soil before it seeds - provide organic matter and nutrients to following crops. Every organic farm must have a 'Crop Rotation Plan' to ensure that steps are being taken to improve the overall quality of the soil.

Animal Welfare Is Important

The key to organic livestock management is the health and living environment of the animals. Rather than relying on antibiotics to reduce disease, organic farms prevent disease by ensuring that animals have a healthy lifestyle, with lots of pasture, comfortable and spacious shelter, and opportunity for natural socialization.

Chickens, ducks and turkeys must have access to pasture and (in the winter) covered outside runs. Battery cages are not allowed and poultry must be fed an all-vegetative diet, consisting only of certified organic grains, oilseeds, hay, grass and vegetable matter. All livestock must have access to food, water, fresh air, daylight, veterinary care and shelter from inclement weather.

Organic Farms Care for the Environment

Environmental protection is the primary reason most organic farmers become involved in organic agriculture. Concern for the environment is portrayed in many aspects of organic farming:

- care in the handling of all animal wastes
- protection of stream banks and watersheds
- protection and fostering of wildlife including wild bird populations
- avoiding the use of agricultural toxins - pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, chemical fertilizers
- researching new ways to recycle agricultural nutrients - closed-loop systems

Organic certification falls under the “*Organic Agricultural Products Certification Regulation*” of the *Agri-food Choice and Quality Act*. The purpose of the Act is to allow a person engaged in the food or agriculture industry to obtain certification that the agri-food product they produce or the practices they follow in the production and selling of agri-food products meet prescribed standards. On the issuance of a certificate, they may advertise the agri-food product as meeting the prescribed standards or being produced and sold in accordance with the prescribed standards.

The prescribed production standards were established by the Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia (COABC) in collaboration with the BC Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries. To be considered for certification, farmers wishing to market organic crops must have kept their land chemical-free for three years and continue to do so. Farmers wishing to market organic meat, poultry and other livestock products must use certified organic feed and no prohibited medication. To ensure standards are observed at all times, organic growers are subject to both regular scheduled and unannounced inspections.

The Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia is an umbrella organization representing provincial organic certifying agencies. It is designated under the Act to implement the British Columbia Certified Organic Program.

Organic produce is identified by the designation British Columbia Certified Organic.

Farm Practices of Particular Interest

Organic farmers are strictly regulated in their farming activities by the Organic Management Standards. These standards stipulate which management practices and inputs are either recommended, allowed, regulated or prohibited in the BC Certified Organic Program. Organic farmers must also adhere to all federal and provincial laws, hence all other Commodity Specific information sheets and all Farm Practices are relevant to this sector.

Legislation

Agricultural producers are expected to follow all legislation that pertains to their farming operation. The *Farm Practices Protection (Right to Farm) Act* stipulates that the farm operation must meet the *Health Act*, *Pesticide Control Act*, *Waste Management Act* and the regulations under those acts. Information on federal and provincial legislation can be found in Appendices B and C.

Acts that pertain to specific farm activities are listed in the farm practices section of this reference guide. Local government bylaws may also apply to some farm practices. Acts that are not referenced elsewhere that are of special interest to organic producers include the following:

Provincial

Agri-Food Choice and Quality Act - This Act allows a person engaged in the food or agriculture industry to obtain certification that the agri-food product they produce or the practices they follow in the production and selling of agri-food products meet prescribed standards.

Publications

Publications that provide further information on organic production include, but are not limited to, the following (refer to Appendix D for details):

British Columbia Certified Organic Production Operation Policies and Farm Management Standards
Introduction to Certified Organic Farming