



Organic farming refers to ecologically-based production systems used to produce food and fiber. Organic farming may be most widely known for what it is not; however, *it is more important to define organic farming by what it is*

. Organic farming can be defined by the proactive, ecological management strategies that maintain and enhance soil fertility, prevent soil erosion, promote and enhance biological diversity, and minimize risk to human and animal health and natural resources. Many kinds of farm products are produced organically including vegetables, fruit, herbs, grains, meat, dairy, eggs, fibers, and flowers.

When consumers buy Certified Organic farm products, they can be certain that they are supporting farmers who take their stewardship roles so seriously that they have voluntarily accepted strict Federally-regulated standards:

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Certified Organic farming systems are the **ONLY** farming systems in the United States that are **REQUIRED** by federal regulation to use an integrated package of management practices that maintain or improve the natural resources of the farm, including soil and water quality

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Certified Organic farming systems are the **ONLY** farming systems in the United States that are

REQUIRED by federal regulation to rely preferentially on preventative management practices to reduce the possibility of weed, insect, and disease problems, and to preferentially use nontoxic physical and mechanical methods to manage pest problems if they do occur; ONLY when these practices are insufficient to prevent or control crop pests, weeds, and diseases can organically-approved materials be used in Certified Organic farming systems

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Certified organic farming systems are the ONLY farming systems in the United States that are REQUIRED by federal regulation to undergo a rigorous annual oversight and certification process to enforce these natural resource protection and pest-prevention requirements

What Does "Certified" Organic Mean?

In addition to the *ecological definition* of organic farming above, there is also a *legal definition*. In the U.S., all products that bear an organic label or advertise organic ingredients must meet or exceed the regulatory standards established the National Organic Program (NOP), regardless of the country of origin. Since 2002, organic certification in the U.S. has taken place under the authority of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) NOP, which accredits organic certifying agencies and oversees the regulatory process.

Certified organic farming systems produce and process products to uniform standards, comply with record-keeping requirements and have been verified as compliant with the regulatory standards by an independent state or private organization that is accredited by the USDA. Small operations with gross sales of organic products than \$5000 a year or less must be grown and handled according to the Federal standards but they are exempt from certification. To find out more about the national organic certification requirements and organic program, visit the USDA NOP website <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop>.

Are Organic Farming Systems Inherently Different From Conventional Farming Systems?

Certified organic farming systems are distinct from other farming systems. Consumers can purchase certified organic products with confidence due to the USDA's strict enforcement of

the regulatory standards. Some administrative requirements of certification include:

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an annual audit of all accredited agencies by the USDA;

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the "Organic System Plan", often called a "Farm Plan", is created by farmers and ranchers to describe their practices, inputs and record-keeping protocols used in the production of crops and livestock or in the processing of organic products;

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a detailed record-keeping system that tracks all products from the field to point of sale;

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maintenance of organic integrity to eliminate cross-contamination with prohibited inputs and noncertified agricultural products, and

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the exclusion of genetically engineered organisms, synthetic fertilizers, synthetic pesticides, preventative antibiotics, growth hormones, and artificial flavors, colors and preservatives.

Certification is an ongoing process that includes an annual update of an operation's organic system plan and inspection of fields and processing facilities. Inspectors verify that organic farming practices such as practicing long-term soil management, maintaining buffers between organic farms and neighboring conventional farms, and record-keeping are being followed. Processing inspections include review of the facility's cleaning and pest control methods, ingredient transportation and storage, record-keeping, and audit control.

How Large is the U.S. Organic Industry?

Organic farming is one of the fastest growing sectors of U.S. agriculture, with sustained growth of approximately 20% per year since 1990. U.S. sales of organic food and beverages have grown from \$1 billion in 1990 to an estimated \$20 billion in 2007, and are projected to reach nearly \$23 billion in 2008. Organic food sales are anticipated to increase an average of 18 percent each year from 2007 to 2010 (Organic Trade Association, 2009). Because of this phenomenal market growth, the organic sector of the US agricultural and food industry is garnering increasing interest from producers, consumers, policymakers and those interested in farm, environmental and nutrition issues (Thilmany, 2006).

Direct market outlets include farmer's markets, community supported agriculture programs, and restaurants, but, in 2006, sales from these outlets accounted for 10% or less of total organic food sales; remaining sales were almost equally distributed among natural food stores and mass-market retail stores (Dimitri and Oberholtzer, 2009). Fresh produce remained the top-selling organic category, but sales of dairy products, beverages, packaged and prepared foods, and breads and grains grew to 63 percent of total organic sales in 2008, from 54 percent in 1997 (Dimitri and Oberholtzer, 2009). Organic foods are now sold at nearly 80% of U.S. mass-market retailers including Wal-Mart, and 50–75% of consumers purchase organic products at least occasionally (Willer and Yussefi, 2008). Due to the commitment of these buyers, the organic food sector now accounts for nearly 5% of total U.S. food sales.

According to the USDA Economic Research Service (2009), 10,159 certified farms were in operation in 2007; in 2005, over 4 million acres of farmland—more than 1.7 million acres of cropland and more than 2.3 million acres of range- and pastureland—was certified organic in the United States.

What is the Value of Organic Products to Consumers?

Researchers have studied consumer preferences for, willingness to pay for, and perception of value of organic products. Organic consumers are diverse in age and gender as well as social, economic, and educational status. They purchase organic products for a variety of reasons including taste, environmental and social benefits, and a belief that organic products are healthier (Willer and Yussefi, 2008).

For more information on organic agriculture, visit eXtension's Organic Agriculture Resource

Area at: <http://www.extension.org/organic%20production> .

References and Citations

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