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Annette Wszelaki

Dana Saywell

Brandon Smith

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Organic Certification in Tennessee

*Annette Wszelaki, Associate Professor and Commercial Vegetable Extension Specialist
Dana Saywell, former Organic Extension Specialist
Brandon Smith, former Organic Crop Researcher
Department of Plant Sciences*

What is organic agriculture?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP) defines organic agriculture as "a production system that is managed by integrating cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance and conserve biodiversity." Organic production methods minimize the use of purchased off-farm inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides, while maximizing the use of on-farm practices that promote naturally occurring ecological relationships.

What is organic certification and why get certified?

Organic certification promotes trust between producers and consumers. Certification provides consumers assurance that a product has originated from an agricultural system using organic production methods. For producers, organic certification provides access to price premiums and specialty markets.

Is it possible to become certified organic in Tennessee?

Yes! While no state or private USDA-accredited certifying agents are located in Tennessee, there are several national and regional certification agencies that operate in the state. These certification agencies work with inspectors located in Tennessee and the surrounding region.

Which certification agencies operate in Tennessee?

Some of the USDA-accredited certification agencies that operate in Tennessee include Quality Certification Services (QCS) from Florida, the North Carolina Crop Improvement Association and Oregon Tilth. A complete listing of USDA-accredited certifiers and their contact information is available online at <http://www.accreditedcertifiers.org/index.htm>.

How to choose an organic certification agency:

- Ask other organic farmers in your area which certification agency they use and if they have been happy with services received. Is the certification agency responsive to the farmer's questions, providing quick and clear answers?
- Call prospective certification agencies and ask questions about their services, fees and responsiveness to farmer questions. For a comparison of certifiers, view the Rodale Institute's Guide to U.S. Certifiers available online at http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/certifier_directory.
- Once you have selected a certification agency, contact the certifying agent to order the application packet and a copy of the NOP standards. For some certifying agencies, the application packet can be downloaded from the Internet for free.

How much does it cost to get certified?

The cost of certification varies depending on the agency's fee schedule, farm size, gross farm sales and distance traveled by the inspector. To determine specific costs for certifying a farm operation, contact the certification agency. To maintain organic certification, producers must re-certify each year and pay annual application and inspection fees. In Tennessee, annual certification costs generally range from \$500 to \$700.

The Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) administers a cost-share program funded by the USDA to help reduce the cost of organic certification for producers. The program will reimburse eligible producers for up to 75 percent of their certification costs, not to exceed \$750. For more information on the TDA's Organic Certification Cost-Share Program, call 615-837-5160 or visit <http://www.tn.gov/agriculture/marketing/organiccost.shtml>.

Who needs to be certified?

The USDA NOP regulations require that all operations producing or handling agricultural products that will be sold, labeled or represented as “organic” must be certified by a USDA-accredited certifying agent. The only exemption is for producers who sell less than \$5,000 of organic agricultural products annually. While these producers are exempt from certification, they must comply with the organic production and labeling standards of the NOP. While exempt producers may identify their agricultural products as “organic,” they may not use the label “certified organic” or the USDA-certified organic seal.

Is there a penalty for misusing the “organic” label?

Yes. The label “organic” is USDA-regulated and improper use of the term is subject to a penalty of up to \$11,000. Misuse of the label includes selling or labeling an agricultural product as organic that is not produced in accordance with NOP regulations.

What land is eligible for organic certification?

For land to be eligible, prohibited substances, such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, treated seed or sewage sludge, must not have been applied to the land for a period of three years immediately preceding harvest of the crop. Additionally, the land must have distinct boundaries and buffer zones to prevent contact with a prohibited substance applied to adjoining land that is not under organic management. Size and location of boundaries and buffer zones vary according to each operation. For details on substances prohibited for organic production, see NOP regulations.

What are the requirements for organic certification?

Requirements for organic certification include:

- Develop, implement and annually update an Organic System Plan and submit it to a USDA-accredited certifying agency. The annual plan includes a farm map, crop locations, information regarding crop rotation, seed sources, pest management strategies and methods of postharvest handling and storage. Management practices outlined in the plan must comply with NOP regulations. When developing the plan, keep in mind that it can be updated as changes in the farm operation occur.
- Permit on-site inspections with complete access to the production operation, including handling areas, structures and offices.
- Maintain all records applicable to the organic operation for at least five years and, if necessary, allow the certifying agent or relevant government officials to access the records to assess compliance. Farm records for organic certification include field histories, maps and a complete disclosure of production, harvest, handling and storage methods, along with sales receipts for organic crops.

Additional Organic Certification Information Resources:

For more information about organic certification and details of the National Organic Standards, visit the USDA NOP website: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop>.

For an online directory of approved products that may be used on certified organic operations, visit the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) website: <http://www.omri.org>.

For resources on organic crop production and guides to organic regulations and the certification process, visit the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (ATTRA) website: <http://attra.ncat.org>.

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