



Organic Agriculture

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Organic Produce

Public concern about the effects of pesticides on health and the environment has led to the development of a market for organic vegetables. Organic produce which is grown without the use of "synthetically compounded chemicals" often sells for a premium price, if marketed properly. Some farmers are interested in dedicating a part of their farming operation to the production of organic vegetables to take advantage of this marketing opportunity. Be sure that you have an outlet or broker to handle your organic vegetables, however, before you start production. Like any specialty item, large acreages of a single organically grown vegetable can severely depress the market price. Supplies of organic produce which exceed the limited demand are often sold at or below going conventional wholesale produce prices.

Organic farming can reduce the cost of production by eliminating chemical inputs, but growers of organic produce face difficulties in managing pests and maintaining soil fertility. Organic farmers maintain fertile soil by applying compost and manure, plowing in legumes, and rotating crops. They build up the organic matter in the soil to improve soil tilth and increase nutrients available to the crop. Organic growers say that building up the organic matter content of the soil is fundamental to their success.

Organic farmers pay close attention to insect pest populations and use a variety of techniques to keep them at manageable levels. Typically, organic farmers plant small acreages of several crop species to decrease the buildup of high pest populations. They use beneficial insects such as *trichogramma* wasps to keep pests at economically acceptable levels. Organic farmers can also use *Bacillus thuringiensis* and various naturally occurring pesticide sprays.

Consumer demand for organic produce is increasing slowly. Annual sales of organic food totals about \$3 billion, or less than 1% of the total amount American consumers spend on American grown food each year. In California, where about half of American produce is grown, about 2% of growers farm organically. Production of organic produce to diversify farming operations and to take advantage of new markets may become an attractive option for more growers in the future.

Organic Production Regulations

"Organic" as defined by the California Organic Food Act of 1979 (amended 1982) refers to an agricultural commodity that was produced, harvested, distributed, stored, processed, and packaged without the application of synthetically compounded fertilizers, pesticides, or growth regulators. The California Organic Foods Act of 1990 requires registration of organic acreage with the county agricultural commissioner, and extends the transitional period for changing from conventional to organic production from 12 months in 1990 to an eventual 36 months in 1996. This makes California standards more consistent with other laws in the country.

Information regarding organic produce, sustainable agriculture, and related organizations can be obtained from the Small Farm Center, University of California, Davis, California 95616. University of California sustainable agriculture research and education program publication #3349 can be obtained at county U.C. Cooperative Extension offices and lists books, organizations, and contacts within the organic produce industry.