

GO Organic



Are You Ready to Go Organic?




The mission of the USDA organic regulations is to ensure the integrity of organic products using the USDA organic logo in the United States and throughout the world. It's the role of an Accredited Certification Agency (ACA)—aka, certifier—to confirm that your organic products meet the USDA organic regulations. This is done through creating and maintaining an Organic System Plan (OSP), and undergoing an annual inspection of your organic operation.

When you're ready to apply for certification, you will complete an OSP. The plan will describe your farming operation, including practices, tools, and inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, etc.). Your certifier will review your OSP to make sure that you are capable of complying with the regulations, and will schedule your first inspection. The goal of the inspection is to confirm that your organic farming practices match your OSP and that your organic procedures are verifiable and well-documented. Once the inspector's report has been successfully reviewed by your certifier and any outstanding questions answered, you will receive your official organic certification. Learn more about the [steps to certification \(bit.ly/Certification-Steps\)](https://www.ccof.org/resources/organic-certification-steps).

How to Use this Self-Assessment Tool

CCOF and the USDA have developed special tools to help you understand the requirements for organic certification. This self-assessment tool will help you understand how some of the organic regulations apply to your operation, let you see how ready your farm is for certification, and determine what you might still need to do to prepare. While the assessment does not cover every aspect of organic certification requirements, answering the questions will help you to complete your first organic certification application.

As you work through the questions, you will gain an understanding of the type of information you will be asked when completing your Organic System Plan (OSP). Answers will be scored red, yellow, or green.

-  Red answers mean you need to fully resolve the issue before you can be certified.
-  Yellow answers mean you may need to change practices in order to comply with the USDA organic regulations.
-  Green answers mean that your current practices likely meet the USDA organic regulations.

Once you have answered all questions, you will review the issues that may need to be resolved to prepare for certification. Helpful resources have been provided at the end.

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Section 1: Parcels

If you farm fields that are not next to each other, or have areas that will be eligible for certification at different times, **complete this section for each parcel.**

Land History

For your land to be certified, it must have been free of all prohibited materials—including fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides not specifically approved for organic production—for at least three years. (See section 6 for more information on allowed and prohibited materials). During the application process you will need to provide specific information on how the land has been managed during those three years to confirm that it is eligible for certification. This information should come from the person who managed or has knowledge of activities on the land during that time. **Note that you can enroll in a certification program at any point during the three-year transition.**

In addition to the three-year land history, you will also provide information about your farm, including:

- A map showing the features and physical characteristics of the farm and the surrounding area,
- Information on how the land next to your growing areas is being used,
- The acreage of each crop you grow, and
- Whether you are growing only organic crops, or both organic and non-organic.

I've managed the land for at least three years so I can provide complete land history.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Although I haven't managed the land for three years, I know the complete land history or I know how to obtain it.

True ● (Green) False ● (Red) Doesn't apply

Prohibited Materials

I have knowledge about the date of the last application of prohibited materials.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I know how to get information about the date of the last prohibited material application from the previous owner/manager.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Red) Doesn't apply

Boundaries and Buffers

To the best of your ability, you must protect your organic land and crops from the unintended “drift” (airborne movement of pesticides) of prohibited substances from adjacent land. If there is high risk for these materials to flow or drift onto your land, a buffer may be required. A buffer might consist of a ditch that prevents water from flowing onto your land, a windbreak or hedgerow that protects your crop from chemicals drift, or enough space to ensure that the crop doesn't unintentionally come into contact with prohibited substances. Some farmers plant crops in the buffer areas and sell them as non-organic. Understanding the risks from neighboring land is the first step to determine what will be required (if anything) to protect your crops.

On the land surrounding my parcel, there is no farming or other activities that could contaminate my land or crops.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

On the land surrounding my parcel, there is non-organic farming (or other activities), but the boundaries are sufficient to prevent contamination.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Reducing Contamination Risk

I can manage the borders of my land in a way that minimizes risk from drift.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I can work with my neighbors to minimize the risk of drift.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Section 2: Recordkeeping

Good recordkeeping is the backbone of a certified organic operation and will help you stay on track! You'll need to record various aspects of your farming process—from seed purchases through production practices and sales. Your records will be reviewed when the inspector visits your farm and must be kept for five years. Records should be tailored to your farm and can come in just about any form as long as they clearly track your production. Keep it as simple as possible so that you can implement consistent habits. Information about recordkeeping and sample recordkeeping forms are available on the [ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture website \(bit.ly/ATTRA-PDF\)](http://bit.ly/ATTRA-PDF) and the [CCOF website \(bit.ly/CCOF-Tools\)](http://bit.ly/CCOF-Tools).

Some of the records you will need to keep include:

- Purchase records for inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides), seeds, and planting stock,
- Application records documenting when and where you applied inputs to your crops,
- Planting and harvest records, including the amount harvested,
- Records of how you handle crops once they leave the field, and
- Sales records detailing where your crop was sold, quantity, and dollar amount.

Required Records

I have a system for tracking the fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides I purchase.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

(If you grow certified organic and non-organic crops, records must distinguish between materials used.)

I have a system for tracking the date, rate, and location for each material application.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I have a system for tracking purchases of seeds and planting stock, including certified organic annual starts.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I can track my crops from the time I plant the seeds through harvest, shipping, and sales.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

(If you sell both organic and non-organic products, harvest, shipping, and sales records must distinguish between organic and non-organic products.)

I sell at farmers' markets and can track what I take to market and how much I bring back unsold.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Section 3: Soil and Water Management

Soil Management

Soil fertility is the heart of organic crop production. Farming practices like crop rotation, cover-cropping, and applications of plant and animal materials improve soil quality, fertility, and increases crop yields. Organic certification requires you to manage soil in a way that maintains or improves physical, chemical, and biological conditions and minimizes soil erosion. While you don't need to use every available fertility strategy, you must use practices that maintain or improve your soil.

The following are examples of practices that help manage the fertility of your soil (among other benefits).

- Crop rotation
- Cover cropping
- Incorporating crop residue
- Using compost and/or manure
- Applying mined minerals and amendments

I follow a fertility plan that maintains and improves the soil.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Monitoring your soil is essential for assessing the effectiveness of your soil management program. How often you monitor your soil depends on need and circumstances. The following are examples of monitoring practices you can use:

- Observing the soil condition
- Observing crop performance

- Comparing crop yields
- Soil analysis

I have monitoring practices that track the effectiveness of my soil management.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Preventing erosion is important for both soil health and maintaining the natural resources on your farm. These practices can be used in areas where there might be erosion problems:

- Cover cropping empty or fallow land
- Permanent cover on roadways/pathways
- False-till or conservation (minimum) tillage
- Strip cropping
- Contour farming or terracing

I use farming practices that minimize erosion.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Water Management

Water is the lifeblood of your crops and the land on which they grow. If you use shared irrigation sources or equipment, you will need ways to prevent prohibited materials from entering your organic crop land. If you use an on-site well you may want to test the water to find out if there are any sources of contamination. If you use municipal water there are typically no additional steps needed to ensure the compliance of your water sources. Your certifier will review this as part of your Organic System Plan (OSP).

I irrigate my crops from a private water source.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I share my water source with other users (includes well, irrigation canal, river, stream, or lake) and take measures to prevent contamination for prohibited substances.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I am aware of contamination risks to my water source and take active measures to prevent water containing prohibited substances from contacting organic crops and land.

- True ● (Green) False ● (Red) Doesn't apply

Section 4: Seeds and Planting Stock

There are specific requirements for seeds, annual seedlings, and other planting stock in the USDA organic regulations. This section is grouped by the type of materials and includes a simple description of the requirement for each type and questions to help you understand if you are meeting those requirements.

Seeds

Seed must be certified organic, however non-certified seed may be used if equivalent organic varieties are not commercially available as long as the conventionally-grown seed is not genetically modified or

treated with prohibited materials. You will be required to show that you actively search for suitable organic seed and keep records of that search. Seed used for edible sprouts must be certified organic.

I grow crops (including cover crops) from all organic seed.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I actively search for organic seeds and have a record of those searches.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I have records to show that non-organic seeds I use are not treated with prohibited materials.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Annual Seedlings

Annual seedlings and transplants that you buy must be certified organic. You can grow your own seedlings as long as they are grown according to organic requirements and are included in your certification.

I buy certified organic seedlings.

True ● (Green) False ● (Red) Doesn't apply

I grow crops from my own annual seedlings, following the USDA organic regulations.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Perennial Planting Stock (trees, vines, etc.)

You can use non-certified perennial planting stock to produce organic crops if an equivalent organic variety is not commercially available. If you are growing trees or other perennial plants to sell (such as in a plant nursery) you must manage the non-organic planting stock organically for a year before it can be labeled or sold as organic.

I source organic planting stock whenever it is available.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I have records to show the non-organic planting stock has been managed organically for at least one year before I attempt to sell the plants as organic.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Other Planting Stock

The conditions for using other types of planting stock (such as rhizomes, shoots, tubers, cuttings or roots including strawberry crowns, raspberry canes, potato eyes) are the same as those for perennial planting stock.

I use planting stock such as rhizomes, shoots, tubers, cuttings, or roots and source organic planting stock whenever it is available.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I use planting stock such as rhizomes, shoots, tubers, cuttings, or roots and have records to show the non-organic planting stock I use meets the USDA organic regulations.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Section 5: Pest Management

Organic farmers must control pests such as insects, diseases, and weeds using preventative practices like crop rotation, nutrient management and other cultural methods, as well as, cultural and mechanical/physical controls.

On the occasions when preventative cultural, mechanical/physical methods fail to control pests, you may use a natural, non-synthetic material. If the natural, non-synthetic materials also fail there are synthetic materials that are specifically allowed and are included on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Materials of the [USDA organic regulations](https://www.ams.usda.gov/nop) ([bit.ly/Cert-Manual](https://www.ams.usda.gov/nop)). Pest control problems should be documented in your Organic System Plan (OSP). Be prepared to demonstrate to your inspector that you have used preventative cultural and mechanical/physical practices before resorting to any chemical methods.

Some ways to prevent pest problems include:

- Farming methods such as crop rotation, strip cropping, planting mixed and beneficial species, and cover cropping.
- Cultural practices such as crop selection, timing of planting, clearing debris, removing disease vectors and weed seed sources, crop nutrient management, water management, mowing, plowing, or mulching, and site-specific irrigation (drip, furrow, etc.)
- Mechanical/physical methods such as traps for rodents, netting for birds, or mulch for weed management.

I know what kinds of pests I am likely to encounter and how I will address them.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I am already using preventative cultural or mechanical/physical methods of pest management.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I currently don't rely on chemical controls.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Section 6: Inputs, Materials, and Production Equipment

Inputs and Materials

Organic farmers can only use fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides that are specifically allowed for organic crop production. All products and materials—including allowed compost and mined minerals—must be approved for your use by your certifier. Treated wood that contacts soil or crops is prohibited for use (fence posts outside of the production area are likely fine).

Two organizations, the Organic Materials Review Institute ([OMRI](http://www.omri.org), www.omri.org) and the Washington State Department of Agriculture ([WSDA](http://bit.ly/WSDA-Materials), bit.ly/WSDA-Materials) publish brand name lists of materials compliant to the USDA organic regulations and allowed for use by organic farmers. Most certifiers accept products that are OMRI and WSDA listed for use by the farmers they certify. These are two of the best resources to use while transitioning your farm.

However, not all products and materials that are allowable will be reviewed by OMRI or WSDA. For example, if you make your own compost tea or buy from a local manufacturer, your certifier can review the product and determine if it is allowed. Once you find a product by one of these methods, add it to your Organic System Plan (OSP) and have it officially approved for your use.

It is crucial during your transition and throughout your certification, to research materials and make sure they are allowed before you use them. If you use a substance that isn't allowed you will have to wait three years from that date before you can certify your land. If you use a non-allowed substance on a greenhouse crop or those grown in a container you will not be able to sell the crops as organic.

I use input materials (including compost/manure, herbicides, and other pesticides) and always make sure that they are allowed for organic production before I use them.

True ● (Green) False ● (Red) Doesn't apply

Treated Wood

You cannot use lumber treated with arsenate or other prohibited materials for new installations or replacement purposes when it will come in contact with soil, plants, or livestock. You may use treated lumber on parts of your property that are not included in your certification or in areas where the lumber will not contact soil, plants, or livestock. If you have treated lumber on your land when you apply for organic certification you will include that information in your Organic System Plan (OSP).

I have existing treated wood in my growing areas and I don't plan on using it for further installations.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Production Equipment

If you use production equipment (sprayers, tractors, combines, etc.) that is also used on non-organic land or crops (or hire custom equipment), the equipment must be maintained to prevent cross-contamination between the non-organic and organic production. Your Organic System Plan (OSP) will include information on cleaning procedures (such as triple rinsing, using compressed air, etc.) and your recordkeeping should track the actual day-to-day activities when these procedures are used.

I use, or contract with someone who uses, equipment in both organic and non-organic production and have written procedures for how the equipment will be cleaned and maintained to prevent contamination of my organic land and crops.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I keep record of when equipment used in my organic fields is cleaned and maintenance procedures are followed.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Section 7: Harvest and Transport

The way you harvest your crop depends on the types of crops you grow and where you sell them. You may harvest yourself, sell the crop in the field, or contract with someone to harvest it for you. In your Organic System Plan (OSP) you will describe the harvest process and explain how the crops are moved from the field to the next step in the process. The "next step" might be field packing, sending the product to a packing facility, moving it to the on-farm washing/packing area to prepare it for market, or transporting it on a truck belonging to the buyer.

Harvesting

I harvest my crop and pack into compliant containers/packaging.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I contract with someone to harvest for me and I have procedures to ensure the contractor's equipment is properly cleaned and maintained if it was used on non-organic crops before mine is harvested.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I sell the crop in the field before harvest and they take care of all packing.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Transporting

Whether you have a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, sell at farmers' markets, or your crop goes directly to a wholesale distributor, once it is harvested, it will need to be transported in a way that ensures there is no mixing with non-organic crops or contamination from any source. It is your responsibility to ensure the organic integrity until the point that you lose ownership of your crop or it is delivered to the final destination. If your customer is responsible for transport then it is their job to protect the organic integrity of the crop from pick-up at your location.

I transport my crop to market or to a certified organic processing facility and have procedures for ensuring organic integrity during transport.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I transport using a trucking company and am certain they know how to keep organic and non-organic crops separate.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I transport both organic and non-organic crops on the same truck and it is easy to tell them apart.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Section 8: Postharvest

Unless you pack your crop in the field or sell it before harvest, you likely do some kind of handling activities before it's sold. If you are only working with the organic crops that you grow and performing simple activities like washing, drying, dehydrating, hulling, shelling, pressing, or hand sorting you may

not be required to have separate certification as a Handler. If you perform handling activities more complicated than these, handle both organic and non-organic produce, or handle products you didn't grow yourself, you will need to be certified as both a Grower and a Handler. This section addresses only the simple handling activities.

Packaging materials must be new, or used in a way that does not contaminate organic crops.

I farm only organic crops and field pack my produce.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I use new packaging for each crop packed.




True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

I have systems and procedures for cleaning and sanitizing the facilities and equipment I use.

True ● (Green) False ● (Yellow) Doesn't apply

Conclusion and Resources

Once you complete the self-assessment, revisit and focus on your yellow and red answers.

-  Red answers mean you need to fully resolve the issue before you can be certified.
-  Yellow answers mean you may need to change practices in order to comply with the USDA organic regulations.
-  Green answers mean that your current practices likely meet the USDA organic regulations

You will need to spend some time resolving the issues indicated in your assessment. Additionally, the contents of this self-assessment do not cover every aspect of organic certification requirements, including natural resources management, sales and labeling. These areas will be examined in the Organic System Plan (OSP).

If you haven't already read the USDA organic regulations, that would be a good next step. Together, the assessment and the regulations will help you understand how the requirements apply to the way you currently farm and what changes you might need to make to your growing practices in order to comply. The USDA organic regulations are available in [searchable electronic format \(bit.ly/E-Format\)](#) and [searchable PDF format \(bit.ly/Cert-Manual\)](#).

These additional resources may also be helpful.

- [USDA Organic Literacy Initiative](http://bit.ly/Organic-Literacy) (bit.ly/Organic-Literacy)
- [Organic Materials Review Institute](http://www.omri.org) (OMRI, www.omri.org)
- [Washington State Department of Agriculture](http://bit.ly/WSDA-Materials) (WSDA, bit.ly/WSDA-Materials)
- [ATTRA – The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service](http://www.attra.ncat.org) (www.attra.ncat.org)
- [Organic Certification Cost Share Programs](http://bit.ly/CostShare) (bit.ly/CostShare)
- [Organic Trade Association's How to Go Organic](http://www.howtogoorganic.com) (www.howtogoorganic.com)
- [eOrganic](http://bit.ly/eOrganic) (bit.ly/eOrganic)
- [Natural Resources Conservation Service](http://bit.ly/N-R-C-S) (NRCS, bit.ly/N-R-C-S)
- [National Association of Conservation Districts](http://bit.ly/Conservation-Districts) (bit.ly/Conservation-Districts)
- [Agricultural Cooperative Extension System](http://bit.ly/Ag-Coop-Extension) (bit.ly/Ag-Coop-Extension)