



# WHAT IS ORGANIC AGRICULTURE?

**Using tools that mimic nature**, organic farmers enhance the health of their environment, resulting in pure and nutritious food. Organic agriculture uses an array of cultural and biological practices to build soil fertility, manage weeds and pests, enhance recycling of nutrients and increase biodiversity. Rather than substituting approved inputs for non-approved inputs, organic farmers continuously improve their farm system by building and balancing their soils that then produce vibrant crops and robust livestock. Organic certification verifies growers' and processors' compliance with USDA regulations, with annual inspection and review.

## Organic Production

Organic production systems emphasize proactive, knowledge-based management, on-farm resources and recognition of our interdependency with nature. Diverse crop rotations interrupt insect, pest, disease and weed problems, reducing the need for off-farm inputs. Using the wisdom from centuries of agriculture along with the latest science and understanding of natural systems results in a sustainable method of food and fiber production to feed our world for generations to come.

## Organic production systems are designed to:

- Maximize biological activity of the soil and minimize soil erosion
- Provide livestock with healthy feeds and living conditions
- Minimize agricultural pollution
- Respond to site-specific challenges by using natural methods and materials



Organic agriculture limits the use of synthetic herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers. Genetically-modified organisms are prohibited. Growth hormones, antibiotics and slaughter by-products are not allowed in organic livestock production. Federal organic rules prohibit the use of sewage sludge (biosolids) or irradiation.

Using an organic systems approach, an organic farmer's management of crop pests might start by improving the fertility of the soil with green manures and a diverse crop rotation. Beneficial organisms, including soil microorganisms, birds and insects, are encouraged by improving their habitat. As a last resort, an organic farmer might apply an approved biological or botanical pesticide.

Organic farmers use on-farm resources whenever possible. Composts, livestock manures and plowed-down legume crops improve organic matter and provide nutrients. Mechanical cultivation, crop rotations, mined soil amendments and cover crops are used to control weeds and pests. Raw manure applications to organic crops for human consumption are regulated to prevent pathogenic contamination.

Farmers promote animal health through sound nutrition based on organic feeds, lush pastures, proper housing, minimal stress and preventative health care practices. Allowing the animals to express their natural behavior, have freedom of movement and access to the outdoors results in strong animal immune systems for all species and exceptional longevity for organic dairy cattle.

### **Organic Certification**

The USDA organic law requires annual inspection and certification of all operations that sell over \$5,000/year in organic products in order to use organic claims and the organic label. Both private and state run-agencies certify operations as organic such as NOFA-NY Certified Organic, LLC. Documentation of inputs, crop and livestock activities, harvests and sales is mandated to verify compliance. To qualify for organic certification, prohibited materials (including prohibited fertilizers, pesticides and genetically modified seeds) must not have been applied to crops or the soil in which the crops are grown for a minimum of 36 months prior to an organic harvest. Dairy animals must be under full organic management for one year before producing organic milk. Meat animals must be certified organic from the last third of their gestation period (before their birth). Day-old chicks can be purchased from any source and are then managed organically to produce organic poultry products.

### **Marketing**

Both their own health, as well as the health of the environment, motivates consumers to pay a higher price (between 10-100% premium) for organic foods. The Northeast has marketing cooperatives, food processors, farmers' markets, schools and other buyers for milk, grains, meats, eggs and fresh or processing vegetables. According to the Organic Trade Association, the market for organic products has increased by 20% per year for the past 12 years. Organic products are found in mainstream supermarkets as well as specialty natural food stores. Organic foods have gained a reputation of high quality, great flavor and superior nutrition, and with increasing concerns about genetically modified organisms,

antibiotics, mad cow disease (BSE) and pesticide residues the organic market is expected to continue to grow.

### **Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY)**

NOFA NY, Inc is an organization of consumers, gardeners and farmers working together to create a sustainable regional food system which is ecologically sound and economically viable. Through demonstration and educational opportunities, we promote land stewardship, organic food production and local marketing. NOFA NY brings consumers and farmers closer together to make high quality food available to all people. Our subsidiary, NOFA-NY Certified Organic LLC, a USDA accredited Organic Certifier, provides quality organic certification services.

### **Additional Resources**

*This Common Ground, Seasons on an Organic Farm* by Scott Chaskey

*Organic, Inc.* by Samuel Fromartz

*The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan

Visit [www.nofany.org](http://www.nofany.org) for more tools, resources and membership information. You can also request a copy of our Food Guide, which will connect you with organic producers, processors, suppliers and stores in your local area.

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