
WHY GROW ORGANICALLY?

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In my work on transitions, I have asked this question of a lot of farmers - why farm organically? Farmers, of course, give various answers. Some make the choice to cut out synthetic materials because of illness in the family or out of a desire to make the farm a safer place for their children. For other farmers, the primary motivation is economic: the premium prices paid for some organic products or the greater independence that comes with reducing expensive off-farm inputs. A few farmers attribute their decision to make changes to a spiritual awakening to their role as steward of God's creation. But the most frequent reason for eliminating toxic chemicals given by farmers I have interviewed is that they noticed that, compared with childhood memories, wildlife had diminished on the farm and earthworms had become so scarce that the soil seemed dead. Organic methods offered a way to bring life back to the farm.

Making the decision to change is the hardest part. Once made, you discover that you are entering a community of farmers who are seeking greater environmental, economic and social sustainability. There is a sense of excitement because there is no set orthodoxy. The solutions for each farm are unique, every season brings new discoveries and further changes. Organic standards are amended every year as we learn more and additional discoveries are made, particularly in the area of biological controls. There is also a sense of nervousness about making these changes because there are no guarantees and not a lot of help from the usual sources, although recently there has been steady improvement in the availability of the information we need. With few exceptions,

farmers who have begun to make changes themselves are generous about sharing what they have learned with other farmers.

In the marketplace, "organic" is presented with a stress on the negatives - no synthetic pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizers, along with the irritatingly misleading label "no spray." Those of us who are farming organically prefer to stress the positive side of our work. We have three interlocking goals: 1) To conserve and build healthy soils; 2) to create and maintain diversity; and 3) to cycle and "recycle" nutrients through the farm system, reducing dependence on non-renewable inputs. If there is an organic orthodoxy, it consists of the simple belief that healthy soils produce healthy plants and that people and animals that eat those plants will tend to be healthier.

As scientists begin to study mature organic systems more carefully, they are making some surprising observations. Tissue tests of organic crops show a higher level of mineral content, especially potassium and phosphorous, than additions of soil amendments can explain. The mechanisms by which biologically active soils and plants interact are poorly understood. In practice, however, many farmers are using organic methods successfully. This is documented in the book *The Real Dirt: Farmers Tell About Organic and Low-Input Practices in the Northeast*, which is based on interviews with farmers running sixty farms in nine northeast states.

As the researchers in the SARE Organic Grape Project have learned, converting to organic management is not just a matter of substituting

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organic materials for conventional ones. Substitution is only the first step. For a crop to do well using organic materials, begin by thinking of the field, and then think of the farm as part of an integrated natural system in which all parts are interrelated. One must go beyond substitution to redesign; changing varieties, soil treatment, pest management, rotations, cover crops and ground covers, and often modifying equipment and marketing as well. A farmer can approach this as a big headache, or as an exciting opportunity to develop a comprehensive approach to planning for the entire farm.

Personally, I find the challenge of working with natural systems very satisfying. At a time when so many farms are going out of business, it is a source of hopefulness to be part of a growing group of farmers and consumers who care deeply about the stewardship of the earth and who see our work as the creation of a regional, sustainable food system. When the organic certification program representatives of the northeast got together to begin a transition to regional standards, we wrote a preamble which sets forth the philosophical framework for organic agriculture in the region.

It reads:

- * To replenish and maintain long-term fertility by providing optimal conditions for soil biological activity.
- * To produce viable quantities of high-quality, nutritious food and feed.
- * To work with natural systems rather than seeking to dominate them.
- * To reduce pollution that may result from farming.
- * To work as much as possible within a closed system with regard to organic matter and recycled nutrients.

- * To encourage the use of renewable resources in regionally organized agriculture systems.
- * To create conditions for farm livestock that ensure them a life free of undue stress, pain, or suffering, and to provide for their sustenance in a way that is respectful of the carrying capacity of the land.
- * To ensure decent and non-exploitive treatment of farm workers.
- * To allow agricultural producers an adequate return and satisfaction from their work, including a safe working environment.
- * To maintain the genetic diversity of the agricultural system and its surroundings, including the protection of plant and wildlife habitats.
- * To consider the wider social and ecological impact of the farming systems.
- * To educate farmers and the public about organic methods.
- * To encourage new organic farms and the conversion of existing conventional farms to organic methods.
- * To sustain the land in healthy condition for future generations.