

Steps to a Successful Organic Transition

The transition from conventional to organic farming requires numerous changes. One of the biggest changes is in the mindset of the farmer. Conventional approaches often involve the use of quick-fix remedies that, unfortunately, rarely address the cause of the problem. Transitioning farmers generally spend too much time worrying about replacing synthetic input with allowable organic product instead of considering management practices based on preventative strategies. Here are a few steps new entrants should follow when making the transition to organic farming:

A) Understand the Basics of Organic Agriculture and the Organic Standards:

Since organic production systems are knowledge based, new entrants and transitional producers must become familiar with sound and sustainable agricultural practices. Transitional producers should be prepared to read appropriate information, conduct their own trials and participate in formal and informal training events.

As mentioned, switching from conventional to organic farming is more than substituting synthetic materials to organic allowed materials. Organic farming is a holistic system that relies on sound practices focused on preventative strategies. Since there are often few organic remedies available to organic producers for certain problems, prevention is the key element in organic production.

It is imperative new organic producers understand the “organic standard” and know what is allowed and/or prohibited. If one fails to meet the requirements, the transitional period could be lengthened and certification delayed. In 1999, the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) released the first edition of the National Standard for Organic Agriculture. Canada became one of first countries in the world to achieve this milestone. These standards will provide the rules of production to guarantee product integrity to the consumer. The 2011 edition of the Canadian Organic Standards are comprised of two documents: the General Principles and Management Standards (CAN/CGSB-32.310-2006), and the Permitted Substances Lists (CAN/CGSB-32.311-2006). These documents are available through the CGSB website at:

<http://www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/onqc-cgsb/programme-program/normes-standards/comm/32-20-agriculture-eng.html>

B) Identify Resources that Will Help You:

Existing organic farmers are generally very helpful in sharing valuable technical information. A good mentor should be able to provide transitional producers with knowledge, practical experience and suggest appropriate reading materials. Mentors are able to identify some of the most important challenges transitional farmers will be confronted with. Mentors may also help source production materials that are otherwise difficult to find. Producers should also contact agrologists,

veterinarians and other agricultural and financial consultants, in order to learn ways to improve their current farming practices.

The Internet is a valuable source of information, especially to new organic farmers. A broad range of reading materials are available from many organic/ecological organizations such as: the Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada (OACC), the Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network (ACORN), the Canadian Organic Growers (COG), the Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia (COABC), the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Services/Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA), the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), and the Agri-réseau/agriculture biologique-Quebec.

Consider joining an organic organization or network to access these valuable resources and establish good working contacts.

C) Plan your Transition Carefully:

Develop a transitional plan with clear and realistic goals. The plan should clearly identify various steps to be taken in making the transition to organic and be sure to include realistic time frames. Identify your strengths and weaknesses. Consider ways to address any weaknesses, while building on strengths. The business side of the transitional plan should contain a multiple year budget and an effective/realistic marketing strategy. Make sure your list of expenses is comprehensive. Include all prerequisites to begin the transition; such as, mechanical weeding equipment, specialized composting equipment and applicators, additional handling equipment dedicated to the organic products, and processing equipment. Although the demand for organic products is continually growing, growers need to make sure they have a reliable market for the organic products they plan to produce.

Careful planning is very important. During the early part of the transitional period, yields are often depressed and premium prices for certified organic products are generally not yet obtainable. Use realistic yields and prices when evaluating the feasibility of your project.

In some instances, it is preferable to continue using conventional measures early on in the transitional process in order to avoid dramatic yield reduction which could jeopardize the financial well-being of the operation.

Farmers who are planning to convert their livestock operation should consider certifying their fields first. This allows time to learn more about organic livestock management requirements while, at the same time, starting to produce organic feeds.

Although organic certifiers generally want to see the entire farm become organic, certifiers generally allow new entrants several years of transition time before the whole farm is fully certified.

Parallel production is the simultaneous production, processing or handling of organic and non-organic crops, livestock and other products of a similar nature (that are indistinguishable). Although this type of activity is highly discouraged and generally prohibited by the Canadian Organic Standards some exemptions exist (i.e. already established perennial crops, agriculture research facilities, production of seed, vegetative propagating materials and transplant). If permitted to practice parallel production, producers must be prepared to deal with significant record keeping in order to ensure traceability and organic integrity.

A slow and well thought-out transition allows producers to maintain a good level of production and reduce financial risks. Take your time - - plan your transition - - avoid the cold-turkey approach.

D) Understand your Soils and Ways to Improve Them:

Since soil is the heart of the organic farming system, it is crucial that new entrants understand the various characteristics and limitations of the soils found on their farm. Soil suitability may vary significantly from one field to the next. Fields with good drainage, good level of fertility and organic matter, adequate pH, biological health, high legume content, and with less weed and pest pressure, are excellent assets. Often these fields are the first ones ready for transition and certification.

Many tools exist to assess soils. Soil chemical, physical and biological analyses, soil survey and legume composition field assessments, and field yield histories are very important and should be considered early in the transition. Unhealthy soils require particular attention.

If farmers plan to grow crops without raising any livestock, it may be necessary for them to source allowable soil amendments such as composted manure, limestone, rock dust, and supplementary sources of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and micro-nutrients. Even with the best of crop rotations that include green manure crops like legumes (nitrogen fixing crops), transitional growers will be challenged if they want to obtain optimal yields without additional livestock manure, compost and/or other off-farm soil inputs. When these inputs are scarce or expensive, producers may benefit from integrating livestock on their farm.

Let's not forget, under organic production, farmers must be able to recycle nutrients through proper nutrient management practices: recycling through good manure and compost utilization, crop rotations, cover crops (green manure, catch, and nitrogen fixing crops), and by reducing nutrient losses due to leaching, over-fertilization, as well as poor manure and compost management (storage, handling, and spreading).

E) Identify the Crops or Livestock Suited for Your Situation:

Before growing a crop or raising any livestock, consider the following: degree of difficulty to grow or raise the product organically, land and soil suitability, climate suitability, level of demand for the product, marketing challenges, capital required, current prices for conventional, transitional and organic products, and profitability over additional workload.

F) Design Good Crop Rotations:

Once the crops are chosen, carefully plan the crop rotation(s) and select the most suitable cover crops (green manure, winter cover crops, catch crops, smother crops, etc.). Crop rotations are extremely important management tools in organic farming. They can interrupt pest life cycles, suppress weeds, provide and recycle fertility, and improve soil structure and tilth. Some rotational crops may also be cash crops, generating supplemental income.

On some farms, land base availability may be a limiting factor when planning your crop rotations. The transitional plan should, therefore, include crop rotation strategies. Responding to external forces such as new market opportunities may also have a significant impact on crop rotations, so

farmers need to consider the effect that growing new crops has on their crop rotations and land base availability.

G) Identify Pest Challenges and Methods of Control:

It is important to know the crop's most common pests, their life cycles and adequate control measures. For instance, Colorado potato beetle may be a pest of significant importance when growing potatoes; cucumber beetles in cucurbitaceas crops (cucumber, squash, and melons); flea beetle in many seedlings crops; clipper weevil and Tarnish Plant Bug in strawberry crops.

There are several measures available to reduce pest pressure: crop rotation, variety selection, sanitation, floating row covers, catch crops, flammers, introduction of beneficial insects, bio pesticides, and inorganic pesticides. Transitional growers should be prepared to use and experiment with some of these options. When considering a new type of production, discuss pest issues with your agrologists, IPM specialists and/or other existing organic producers to optimize your chances of success.

Availability of organic supplies has improved significantly over the past few years. New pest control products containing B.t., spinosad, kaolin clay are effective and currently available to organic growers.

It is often reported that the types of weeds found on the farm evolve with time as growers change the way they grow their crops and control their weeds. By keeping track of the weed population, growers will be able to refine their crop rotations and improve their control measures.

Under organic livestock management, cattlemen must provide attentive care that promotes health and meets the behavioral needs of various types of livestock. With good herd health practices, farmers rarely need to rely on conventional medicine. Organic cattlemen should, however, try to familiarize themselves with alternative remedies such as herbal/aroma therapies, homeopathy, and immune system promoters (probiotics, kelp).

H) Be Ready to Conduct Your Own On-Farm Trials:

Successful organic farmers continuously try new and/or innovative management practices. Practices such as cover cropping, inter-planting, and use of various soil and pest control materials need to be evaluated regularly by organic farmers. Be prepared to try new approaches.

I) Be Ready To Keep Good Records:

Record keeping is one of the most important requirements to maintain organic integrity. Farmers are expected to keep detailed production, processing and marketing information. This information includes everything that enters and exits the farm. Third party, independent inspectors require farmers to present the above mentioned documentation when inspecting the farm operation. Once the record-keeping requirements are understood and the reporting procedure established, paperwork becomes routine.

J) Get familiar with the Organic Regulations:

- NB Organic Grade Regulation (2014):

<http://laws.gnb.ca/en/showtdm/cr/2014-50/2014-50/se:5/se:5>

- Federal Organic Products Regulations (2009):

<http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/regulations/SOR-2009-176/>

K) Avoid these Common Mistakes:

- Underestimating the need for good transitional and marketing plans.
- Underestimating the need to fully understand the Canadian Organic Standards. Organic producers must understand the standards in order to know what practices and products are permitted and prohibited.
- Failing to think prevention. Transitional farmers should consider improving their crop rotation, soil and crop management skills, livestock management practices (feeding program, herd health program, grazing system, housing facilities, and husbandry).

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