

A FARMER'S TOOLKIT
BUYER'S LANDSCAPE

2026 EDITION

Wolf & Associates
THE ORGANIC SPECIALISTS





Top Ways to Reach Buyers

- Attend Conferences, Trade Shows and Field/Farm Days
- Ask Neighbors for Recommendations
- Use the Organic Integrity Database and Directories

Example:

<https://Practicalfarmers.Org/Programs/Field-crops/Small-grains/Small-grains-business-directory/>

- Check the Web Sites of Potential Markets for Vendor Information
- Call or Email Directly
- Work With Your Local Food Hub

THE 6 C's FOR TODAYS BUYERS

- 1 COMMUNICATION
- 2 CONSISTENCY
- 3 CARING
- 4 COLLABORATION
- 5 CONNECTION
- 6 COST

THEY SAID IT. WE LISTENED.

1 Communication Matters

“You cannot over communicate!”

Chris, *Natural Foods Retailer*

“Be a good communicator. Clear; not chatty.
We prefer someone who picks up the phone.”

Bu, *Wholesale Distributor*

“Most important is ongoing communication and keeping in touch.
Minimizing surprises is valuable.”

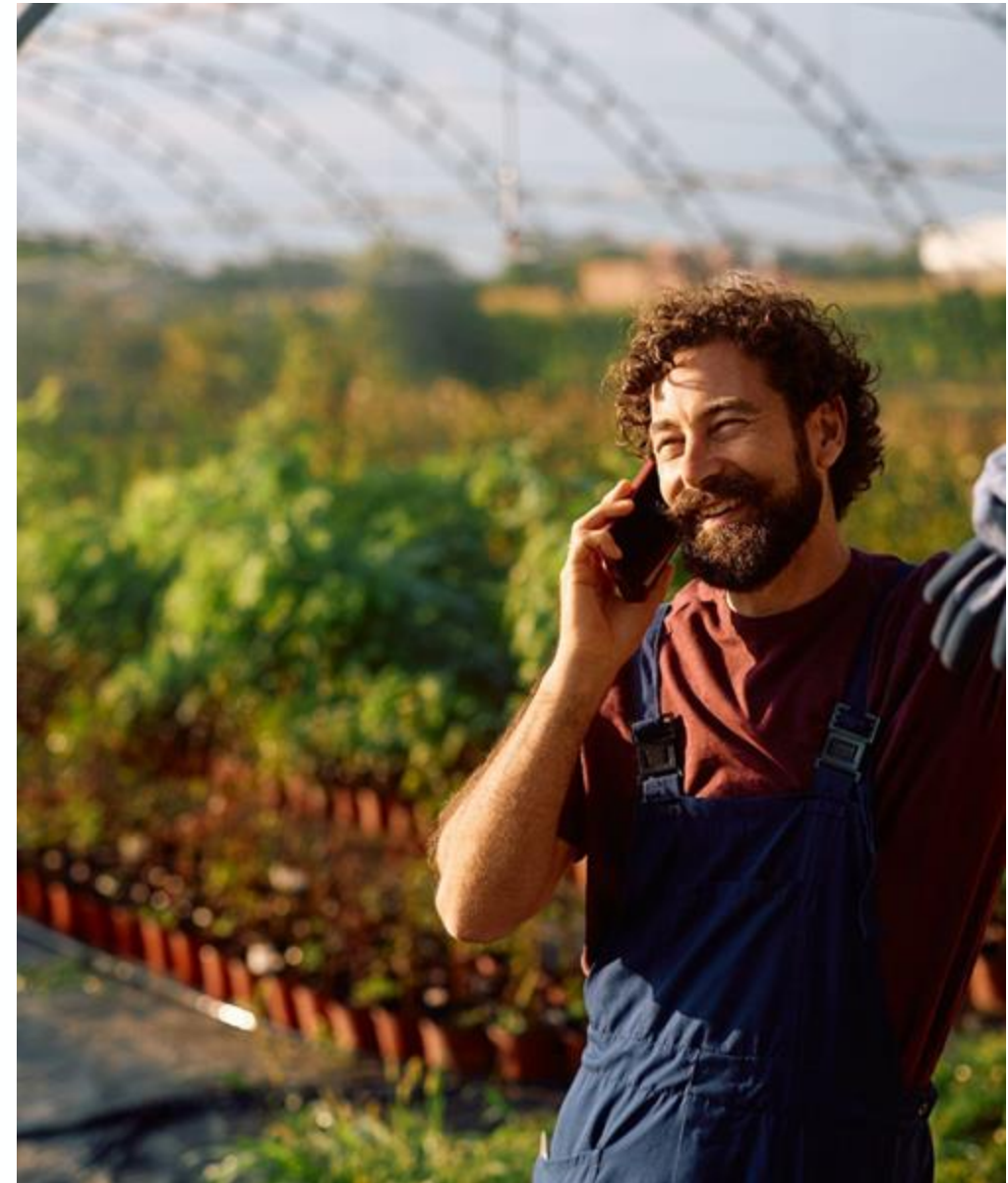
Jess, *Wholesale Distributor*

“It takes a year to fully build that farmer relationship.
There is a lot of communication. We act as a guide.”

Sarah, *Wholesale Distributor*

“Sometimes it’s hard to get ahold of them. Farmers are out in the field. A prompt response (from farmers) improves the relationship.”

Carolyn, *Institutional Food Service Buyer*



THEY SAID IT. WE LISTENED.

2 Consistency Matters

“Our number one attribute is consistent quality.
Know the difference between quality and condition.
Know what makes a successful pack.”

Kenny, *Natural Foods Retailer*

“We want consistency instead of variability
in cost, supply, and quality.”

Director of Procurement, *Institutional Food Service*

“We like to have the relationship [with farmers] formalized
so we can give our clear expectations.”

Grain Buyer



THEY SAID IT. WE LISTENED.

3 Caring Matters

“I want to hear the farmer’s story.
Simple, personal connection matters.”
Jacob, *Institutional Food Service Buyer*

“Put yourself in the buyer’s shoes.”
Jim, *Grain Buyer*

“In order for the grower to succeed, the buyer must succeed.
I think any business relationship should have a win-win attitude.
Relationship is based on trust. I like a sense of partnership with
farmers.”
Bulk Buyer, *Organic Wholesaler*

“Be persistent. Be patient. Yes, we can build a relationship”.
Bu, *Wholesale Distributor*



THEY SAID IT. WE LISTENED.

4 Collaboration Matters

“Go through the [school district] bid process. If you have questions, ask us. We encourage smaller farms to join other farms. We pay on time.”

Randal, *Institutional Food Service Buyer*

“We appreciate collaboration in advance—we need to hear from farmers prior to their season.”

Carolyn, *Institutional Food Service*

“It’s easier to pool our cotton into our co-operative. The co-op then finds buyers.”

Clay, *Cotton Cooperative Buyer*



THEY SAID IT. WE LISTENED.

5 Connection Matters

“I love walking the fields with my Produce Team. If you can get out to the farm, it creates inspiration and advocacy for organic.”

Chris, *Natural Foods Retailer*

“Do your homework. Go to the store and do research. Come in with your eyes wide open.”

Kenny, *Natural Foods Retailer*

“Walk into the store and look at labels and see what is on shelf. We’re big on grower profiles.”

Allan, *Natural Foods Retailer*

“We buy directly from farms and dairies. I’ll physically drive my truck to pick up from a local farm.”

Jacob, *Institutional Food Service Buyer*



THEY SAID IT. WE LISTENED.

6 Cost Matters

“I cannot pay farmers market prices. That’s often an awakening for growers. I cannot sell a head of lettuce for \$5.99.”

Chris, *Natural Foods Retailer*

“We struggle with dollars allocated and with getting organic. We are very limited as cost is an impediment. High price points make it almost impossible.”

Naima, *Institutional Food Service Buyer*

“In schools, cost is a consideration.”

Carolyn, *Institutional Food Service*

“Cost is a big factor [in deciding which organic growers we buy from].”

Jim, *Grain Buyer*

“We’ll pay a bit more for truly local and take less on margin.

Kenny, *Natural Foods Retailer*



THEY SAID IT. WE LISTENED.

Farmers Agreed

“The buyer relationship to me was never a one-way street. It only worked if we could give them something that helped them, too.”

Steve, *Certified organic orchard*

“You need to know your market, if you have a market. And you have to be able to deal with failure . . . because there's going to be some. That's why we stay very, very diversified.”

Anonymous, *Certified organic seed and feed*

“If we all are trying to be one unto ourselves, we're not going to accomplish too much. But if we're working together, twos and whatnot, you do a lot better.”

David, *Certified organic dairy*

“If you have a new crop, you definitely want to have that contracted or be working with a buyer that stands behind what you're growing.”

Anonymous, *Certified organic grain and legumes*



The DO'S and DON'TS

The Way to Win With Organic Buyers



DO

- Send personalized emails and follow up with a succinct voicemail message
- Drop off or ship samples and call to follow up
- Ask about their gaps in supply and the buyer's needs in future seasons
- Patiently persist in your outreach
- Respond to buyers' inquiries within 24 hours
- View your outreach as building relationships for long term benefit
- Delegate these tasks if you prefer to work on your farm/ranch instead of the office

The Way to Win With Organic Buyers



DON'T

- Expect farmers' market prices
- Chase trends - buyer's want farmers who LOVE what they grow
- Avoid sharing the bad news
- View getting a top price as a 'win'
- Get overwhelmed by buyer requirements
- Grow what is already saturated in your region
- Presume transportation expectations

OPPORTUNITIES by CATEGORY

OPPORTUNITIES BY CATEGORY

Retail Grocery Buyers—Natural Foods Stores

KEY INSIGHT:

It can take as long as a full year to get into the larger, national retail chains while independent retailers may be able to bring in new vendors/farmers within a matter of days.

- Being local to the store is a benefit
- Premiums for products in transition to organic may be negotiable
- Buyers admit to a preference for veteran farmers vs new farmers
- Buyers appreciate new growers who come prepared and provide samples
- Buyers want to build relationships with organic growers
- Buyers value a farmer's true story
- 'Boom and bust' cycles are real
- Buyers cited gaps for: organic floral, heirloom apples, culinary varieties of mushrooms, fruits and vegetables that align with the cultural heritage of the community

OPPORTUNITIES BY CATEGORY

Natural/Organic Wholesale Buyers

KEY INSIGHT:

These buyers need transportation solutions that keep their trucks full. If you know of other certified organic farmers in your region, let the buyers know there is more than one reason to send a truck your way.

- Buyers need organic growers to understand wholesale pricing
- Buyers want growers to LOVE what they grow vs. growing for prices
- Focusing on growing fewer things but higher quality is a bonus
- Knowing what is saturated in the marketplace is appreciated
- Working cooperatively with other nearby organic growers is a plus
- Just pick up the phone – start the conversation and ask questions
- Some of these buyers work with brokers; ask for a list

OPPORTUNITIES BY CATEGORY

Institutional Buyers School Districts and Foodservice

KEY INSIGHT:

Every school district buyer/manager/chef we spoke with wants organic root vegetables and correctly sized fruit, especially apples, oranges, and berries for the entire school year.

- Expect a bid process
- Some school districts and food service buyers rely on food hubs
- Activists and advocates for healthier school meals boost use of organic ingredients
- School districts plan menus months in advance.
Use this to your advantage to plan sales
- School food advocates can serve as ‘connectors’ to school district purchasers.
- More school districts are shifting to a scratch cooking model to improve nutrition and taste.
- Cost can be a barrier
- School districts are renowned for paying on time

OPPORTUNITIES BY CATEGORY

Grain Buyers- Feed & Food

KEY INSIGHT:

Ask the buyer for crop specifics before buying seed or planting. Some require particular varieties and some even offer seed programs/bulk buying opportunities for growers.

- Most work on multi-year contracts
- Samples are essential as buyers send them for testing
- Longer planning periods are the norm
- Infestation of grain deliveries is the top quality concern
- Grain buyers like to work with farmers year-over-year
- Current gaps in organic grain supply include field peas, lentils, milo, feed grade organic corn, soy, & high-oleic soy
- Grain prices are down across the board due to import pressure
- Several buyers offer programs to support farmers' success
- Most grain buyers have a multi-state regional sourcing protocol

OPPORTUNITIES BY CATEGORY

Organic Fiber and Seed

KEY INSIGHT:

If you grow cotton, participating in a Cotton Co-operative will greatly enhance your ability to sell your crop. If you grow seed, know all legal requirements in advance and save yourself from future headaches.

ORGANIC FIBER

- Organic fiber is experiencing profound challenges as a sector
- Inconsistent weather conditions affect cotton quality and reduce yields
- Most domestic organic cotton is sold for non-woven products
- Domestic manufacturing infrastructure is insufficient
- Joining an Organic Fiber Co-operative offers a path to success

ORGANIC SEED

- Being a farmer is not the same as being a seed farmer
- There are legal requirements for seed purity
- Weed seed in the seed crop is a big problem
- Farmers must provide a good composite sample at harvest
- Consider profitability over multiple years
- Supply gaps for cover crop seed include radishes, oats, rye and peas.

OPPORTUNITIES BY CATEGORY

Dairy/Whole Milk

KEY INSIGHT:

Transportation and product quality are watchwords for these buyers. Ask about bonuses for quality or volume improvements.

- Organic milk buyers love to maintain long-term relationships
- Location matters—Being near pick-up routes or processing facilities is an advantage
- Farms of all sizes are welcome, provided there is enough volume along the pick-up route
- Organic dairy offers prices premiums over non-organic, plus more consistent prices
- Some buyers offer quality and volume bonuses
- Some buyers may offer help with certification and inspections or coaching to increase quality and production
- Organic dairy farmers who grass feed their cows are sought after in the current marketplace



Final Insights – Storm Clouds Ahead

While organic is growing at 5.2% and is a \$71 billion industry, there are some gray clouds hovering that organic and TOPP farmers should be aware of:

- **Misinformation is rampant.**

There is confusion amongst buyers and consumers alike.

- **Example:** One of the institutional buyers thought organic farmers didn't use cover crops and only regenerative farmers used cover crops and other soil health practices.

- **Awareness of regenerative is rising, and so is confusion.**

Polarization around these agricultural approaches is confusing to both consumers and media. More cogent and balanced education is needed.

- **Some sectors of organic are extremely challenging.**

Organic fiber and meat are examples of extreme pricing sensitivity. Others, such as organic grains, are experiencing record low prices due to import pressure whilst there are gaps for organic corn and soy for feed.



Final Insights – A Bright Horizon

Listening to 28 buyers across categories provided bright spots on the horizon for organic farmers, ranchers, and producers:

- **School districts are a major opportunity** especially in states where free breakfast, lunch, and snacks is universal.
- **Listening to buyers** is a) appreciated and b) good for current and future business for organic farmers.
- **Nutrient-density was cited as an emerging buying criteria:** Offering data on soil health and nutrient density will likely please buyers.
- **Turning cover crops into revenue crops:** Some buyers support farmer's success by recommending cover crops that can actually become revenue crops
- **The mantra we heard from buyers:**
"LOVE WHAT YOU GROW!"



Final Takeaways

- Buyers **WANT MORE** organic but price can be an issue
- They **CHAMPION** Organic and TOPP Farmers but value experienced farmers over novices
- They welcome **HEARING DIRECTLY** from Organic Farmers and want prompt responses
- These buyers **VALUE RELATIONSHIPS** with **RELIABLE** Growers & Co-ops
- Most are **REALISTS & EMPATHIZE** with the challenges of organic farming
- Most buyers were open to direct inquiries from farmers, especially farmers who have done their homework to understand the buyer's business model and pricing constraints.
- Make contacts personalized; no group emails
- Be prepared to follow up

THANK YOU

DISCUSSION

