



Organic Consideration For Small-Scale Farmers

Key Considerations for Practices

SOIL HEALTH

Soil health is the foundation of regenerative organic agriculture. Implementing practices such as cover cropping, crop rotation, and conservation tillage is essential for building strong, resilient soils. These practices are the first step in developing a successful organic farming system. Without healthy soil, production declines and overall farm resilience is weakened.

Cover Crops are primarily used to improve soil health and should be used whenever fields would otherwise be left bare. They are generally categorized into two groups: legumes and non-legumes.

- Benefits include:
 - Improved soil fertility
 - Weed suppression
 - Increased water-holding capacity
 - Enhanced biodiversity

Crop Rotation is a core practice in successful organic farming. It involves planting different crops sequentially on the same land.

- Benefits include:
 - Interrupting pest and disease cycles
 - Improving soil health
 - Increasing root diversity and biomass
 - Promoting biodiversity

Conservation Tillage minimizes soil disturbance and maintains at least 30% soil cover with crop residue after planting.

- Benefits include:
 - Protecting soil resources
 - Improving soil quality
 - Increasing water retention
 - Supporting natural pest control

BIODIVERSITY

The goal of organic farming is to create a living, functional agroecosystem by increasing biodiversity both above and below ground.

- **Livestock Integration** - Integrating livestock into crop systems can enhance nutrient cycling and assist with pest management through grazing. Proper management is critical to prevent overgrazing and soil degradation, and adequate shelter must be provided.
- **Crop Diversity** - Growing a variety of crops increases system resilience, reduces pest and disease pressure, and improves soil health through diverse root systems and nutrient demands.
- **Pollinators** - Establish pollinator habitats by planting native flowering species that bloom throughout the growing season.
- **Natural Habitats & Ecosystem Services** - Preserving natural areas supports beneficial insects, birds, and pollinators. A healthy farm ecosystem depends on wildlife—these natural systems are valuable farm assets.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR TRANSITION

- **Start with Soil Health** - Focus on building soil through proven practices before scaling production.
- **Soil Testing** - Conduct soil tests to assess nutrient levels and document deficiencies.
- **Organic Inputs** Use approved organic amendments such as compost, manure, and biological inputs, along with compliant pest management products.
- **Integrated Pest Management (IPM)** - Use strategies such as beneficial insects, row covers, mulching, and approved organic controls.
- **Crop Selection** - Choose crops that are well-suited to your region and aligned with market demand.
- **Livestock Considerations** - Small ruminants and poultry require less land per animal. Be sure to understand local regulations and zoning requirements.
- **Recordkeeping** - Keep detailed records of inputs, field activities, and yields. This supports certification and improves decision-making. Recordkeeping is business hygiene.
- **Networking & Education** - Connect with other organic farmers and organizations. Attend workshops, field days, and trainings.
- **Mindset Shift** - Organic farming requires a shift from controlling nature to working with natural systems.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CERTIFICATION

Organic certification can provide access to premium markets, but long-term success depends on consistent demand and strong business planning. Preparing early positions your farm to take advantage of future opportunities. The goal is to build reliable, profitable revenue streams. For organic systems to be sustainable, they must also be economically viable.

- **Long-Term Commitment** - Transitioning to organic requires a shift in mindset and a long-term dedication to sustainable practices.
- **Recordkeeping** - Maintain detailed records of farm activities, inputs, harvests, and sales. This is essential for certification and good business management.
- **Regulations & Resources** - Understanding USDA National Organic Program (NOP) standards is critical for compliance and accessing support programs.
- **Cost of Certification** - Certification includes application fees, inspections, and ongoing compliance costs. Cost-share programs may be available to help offset expenses.
- **Organic Infrastructure** Ensure access to certified organic facilities when needed (e.g., for value-added products like jams or processed goods).
- **Market Demand & Economic Viability** Evaluate your local and regional market demand before transitioning to organic production.

