

Becoming a Certified Organic Grower

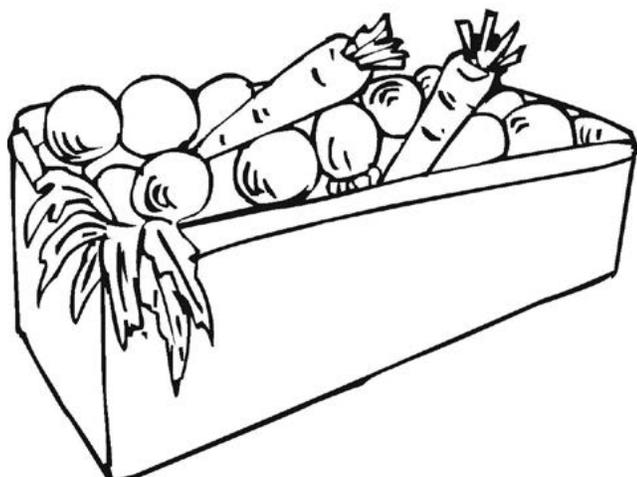


The Mississippi organic certification policy was approved on May 21, 2004, by the USDA National Organics Program. This policy was developed to benefit organic growers. It helps ensure the quality and value of organically grown products. Although the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) stopped providing certification to organic growers in 2012, growers can continue to be certified by private certification companies.

In Mississippi, the first applications were received and reviewed in 2005. The first six growers were approved that year. Six more were approved in 2006. By the middle of 2007, an additional 12 applications had been approved, for a total of 24 certified organic growers. As of 2019, there were 38 certified farms and handlers in Mississippi, including livestock, forages, herbs, coffee, blueberries, jams and jellies, sweet potatoes, and other fruits and vegetables. The updated list can be seen anytime at <https://organic.ams.usda.gov/integrity>.

Interest in organic fruits and vegetables is steadily growing in Mississippi. Some commercial growers are trying organic methods on a small scale before requesting certification to help decide if this route is best for their business.

This publication was written to assist commercial fruit and vegetable growers with the process of becoming certified in Mississippi.



Getting Started

Q: What is organic?

A: The National Organic Program (NOP) defines organic as “a labeling term that refers to an agricultural product produced in accordance with the Act and the regulations in this part.” It defines organic production as “a production system that is managed in accordance with the Act and regulations in this part to respond to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.” These are very legalistic definitions because the word “organic” has become a legal term. In general terms, however, “organic” is growing without the use of synthetics. “Synthetics” can refer to fertilizers, pesticides, genetically modified seed, and just about any other input into the production system.

Q: What are the benefits of being a certified organic grower?

A: Being certified allows the grower to use the term “organic” on the label and in advertising and promotion. This label can give the grower a significant advantage in the marketplace by attracting consumers who want to buy organic produce. The term “organic” indicates that the produce has met the high standards of the National Organic Program. People looking for organic produce are generally willing to pay a higher price due to perceived health benefits or other personal preferences.

Q: What if a grower is not certified? Can he/she claim his/her produce is organic?

A: If a grower sells more than \$5,000 of produce per year and is not certified, the term “organic” cannot be used. Growers can state that their produce is naturally grown, pesticide free, chemical free, all-natural, etc., but those who sell this much cannot legally use the term “organic” unless they are certified.

Q: Are there certain crops that are better for organic production?

A: Any fruit or vegetable crop can be certified. However, some are easier to grow organically than others. Crops that are prone to lots of insects and diseases in Mississippi are not a good choice; those that do well without as much pest management would be better.

Deciding Whether to Get Certified

Q: Do I need to be certified?

A: Most commercial organic growers need to be certified. Commercial growers in Mississippi are required by law to be certified in order to sell their produce as organic if their sales exceed the \$5,000 limit described in the NOP regulations. Home gardeners do not need to be certified, no matter how much produce they grow, as long as they are not selling it.

Q: Do all commercial growers need to be certified?

A: No. Growers who sell less than \$5,000 of produce per year do not need to be certified.

Q: What about growers who are not certified and sell less than \$5,000 per year? Can they claim their produce is organic?

A: Yes, they can, but there are restrictions. Even though growers who sell less than \$5,000 do not need to be certified to use the term “organic,” they are still required by law to follow the same rules as certified organic growers. As stated in the law, “The NOP Exemptions and Exclusions [205.101(a)(1)] allow growers with sales less than \$5,000 to use the term ‘organic,’ while exempting them from certification and from having to submit a farm plan, but they must follow the organic rules otherwise, and their products cannot be used in processed goods as ‘organic’ ingredients.”

Of course, home gardeners who do not sell their produce can use the term “organic,” regardless of how much they grow.

Q: What if I only want to certify part of my farm?

A: You can certify only part of your farm as organic. If you do so, only the organic area must be managed according to organic standards.

Q: Will the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) certify my farm as organic?

A: No. While MDAC was providing organic certification for several years, they no longer provide this service.

Applying for Certification

Q: What is the first requirement to become a certified organic grower?

A: Before you can qualify to be a certified organic grower, you must stop using synthetics. In fact, you must not have used synthetics for 36 months before you can apply to be an organic grower. If you have used any chemicals on your crops within the past 3 years, you should document the date of the last application. You should also note what chemical(s) you used. Wait until 3 years have lapsed since that date before applying for certification.

Q: How do I get certified?

A: To become certified, you must contact a certifying agency and follow application procedures. These usually involve filling out an application, an on-site inspection, proof of field history, and a review of all of your field inputs.

Q: Who can certify that I am organic?

A: You can get certified through a private certifier.

Q: Who are the private certifiers?

A: There are private certifiers across the United States. Some will work with organic growers just in their region, while others will work anywhere in the country or other countries. A list of USDA-accredited certifiers is posted on the USDA’s website at <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/certifying-agents>. Currently, there are nearly 78 domestic accredited agencies listed. While none are located in Mississippi, many will come to Mississippi farms for certification.

For more information, contact the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program at Fruit and Vegetable Programs, USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 2077-South Building, Stop Code 0235, Washington, D.C. 20250-0235, or <http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv>.

Q: How long does it take to become a certified organic grower?

A: Once you apply to be certified, you need an on-site inspection. A review of the written application and on-site inspection must be approved by a certifying agency. This can take a few months and will vary by company.

Q: How much does it cost to become certified?

A: Private certifiers set their own fees, based on their own criteria. Rates are based on the size of the organic field(s), what crops you want to grow, travel expenses for the certifier, and other fees. Note: reinspection is required each year.

Maintaining an Organic Crop

Q: Do the seeds I buy need to be organically grown?

A: You should make every effort to find organically certified seeds for each crop. If they are not available, document at least three attempts to purchase organic seed. If organic seed is not available, you can use conventional, untreated, non-genetically modified (non-GMO) seeds. Ask your certifier to approve the seed before planting it.

Q: What about transplants?

A: Transplants must be grown organically by the grower or purchased from a certified organic nursery. You can use untreated, conventionally grown transplants if you can document at least three attempts to locate organic transplants. Get approval from your certifier before buying this type of transplant.

Q: What kinds of organic fertilizers and pest management can I use?

A: The best place to check each product is on the website of the Organic Materials Research Institute (OMRI), <http://www.omri.org>. Remember that a product label that says “organic” may not actually be on the NOP list of approved substances. Only substances on the NOP list can legally be used on a certified organic farm. All products on OMRI’s website are approved; a statement on the label will indicate OMRI approval. It is your responsibility to make sure the product is OMRI approved or on the list of approved substances on the USDA’s NOP website before using it.

Finding More Information

Q: How can I find out the exact rules and regulations of organic certification?

A: All of the national rules are published by the USDA and are posted online at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOP>.

Q: Where can I find more information on organic production?

A: For more organic production information, request the following publications:

- Organic Vegetable IPM Guide (MSU Extension Publication 2036)
- Nonchemical Weed Control for Homeowners (MSU Extension Information Sheet 1580)
- Southern Organic Resource Guide, published by the Independent Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA) in collaboration with the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)
- Suppliers of Organic Fertilizers, Rock Minerals, Composts, and Pelletized Poultry Litter in the Deep South by Steve Divers, former Agriculture Specialist with ATTRA

All of these publications are available online at <http://extension.msstate.edu/crops/commercial-horticulture/organic-fruit-and-vegetables>, as well as “Organic Information Resources,” a comprehensive online resource guide.

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