

# How to Farm Organically

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According to the United States Department of Agriculture, "Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain, and enhance ecological harmony."<sup>[1]</sup> If you want to farm organically on your own time, the process is time intensive and requires a lot of research and dedication. However, if you love the idea of making your own environmentally stable farm, the effort will be worth the reward.

Method  
1

## Assembling Your Garden

**1 Test your soil.** Your soil may need to be adjusted if it is not healthy enough to support crops. You should not simply place plants in the soil and hope for the best. Always get your soil tested before starting your own organic farm. Chemicals from other places may have seeped into your soil, and it may not have the right balance of nutrients to support plant life.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

- A home testing kit will only give you a list of numbers related to your soil. Instead, you should send your soil to a local agricultural extension office. The office will both test your soil and send you back a breakdown of the state of your soil, and what the numbers on your sheet mean in terms of planting crops.
- The agricultural extension office will also offer suggestions on how to treat your soil. When sending in your soil, make sure to specify that you're going organic. This way, the suggestions you get will omit chemical treatments that go against the organic lifestyle.
- For best results, get your soil tested in the fall. While you can use a home testing kit, this is not recommended unless you have extensive experience farming.

**2 Make any corrections needed to your soil.** Once you know the state of your soil, you may have your work cut out for you. If you're lucky, your soil will only need a minimal amount of work before you begin farming. However, you may have to put in a lot of time and money to create quality soil before you start your organic farm.<sup>[4]</sup>

- Poor soil drainage may be the most difficult and costly problem to correct. You will have to use a system called subsurface drainage to get the soil where it needs to be, which can cost between \$1,250 to \$2,500 per year. You will also have to pay for labor, unless you know how to install a subsurface system yourself.
- In some cases, you can begin farming and the soil will adjust with time. It can take, however, about 10 years to get the soil where it needs to be. Methods like crop rotation, fertilization with manure, and on-farm composting can all restore nutrients to your soil. While this method takes awhile, it is the cheapest. It will only cost you one to two cents a year.
- Read over the paperwork you got from your agricultural extension office closely for suggestions. You can decide whether to do a major overhaul of your soil, or to take mild methods to improve its quality, based on the current state of your soil type.

**3 Take climate into consideration.** You will not be able to grow any type of plant you want on your farm. The climate in your area affects which plants can be grown organically. You will have to choose plants that fare well in your area's climate. Plants that require a different climate may only grow with the use of chemicals and pesticides.<sup>[5]</sup>

- If you live in a cooler area, it may be difficult to grow certain plants. Tomatoes and tender fruit, for example, are best grown in a warmer area. Spring grains and crucifer crops may do better in a cold area.
- You should also take winter into consideration. The survival of perennial fruit plants, as well as winter cereal and forage crops, depends on the severity of your area's winters.
- You should always read up on any crops you choose and know which temperatures are too warm or too cold for them to thrive. Select plants that could reasonably survive given your area's climate.

**4 Visit a local farmer's market.** Most farmers here will practice organic techniques to grow their crops. Therefore, crops sold here are likely to thrive naturally in your area. This will give you a sense of which crops to plant, and also introduce you to local farmers. You can make connections you can use later when you need assistance and advice.<sup>[6]</sup>

- You can look online to find local farmer's markets in your area, or ask at a local food co-op. See which days the markets are operating, and make a point of visiting the farmer's markets on these days.
- See what kind of fruit, vegetables, flowers, and other plants are being sold. Ask farmers if they grow organically. Ask them about the type of soil they have on their farms.
- Try to network with some local farmers. Ask for phone numbers and email addresses. If you need advice along the way, you can reach out to a local farmer with experience growing organic produce. Later, when you're ready to sell your crops for profit, you will have a working relationship with the local market.

**5 Plant your crops.** For organic farms, crops should be grown in wide beds. This extra space between rows helps naturally repel fungal attacks as it increases air circulation. You want to make sure you do not walk on your crops so, if possible, have raised beds on your farm.<sup>[7]</sup>

- Group your plants by type. All the tomatoes should be grown in one place, for example, and all the snow peas should be grown in another.
- Raised beds are portions of soil raised slightly off the ground. If you are able to raise soil in your area, do so, as this will reduce some traffic on your plants. Plant your seeds with ample space in between, as this will allow crops to thrive. For specific instructions on how much space, you will have to look at a Farmer's Almanac or similar publication for instructions on the precise seeds you're planting.
- While wide, raised beds generally work for organic crops, the precise means of planting your crops does depend on the type you chose. Always research your crops prior to planting, and reach out to other organic farmers for advice.

Method  
2

## Maintaining Your Farm

**1 Start a compost heap.** This will provide natural fertilizer to your plants, lessening your need for chemical varieties. You can have a compost heap outside, or maintain a compost heap in a container somewhere in your kitchen.<sup>[8]</sup>

- You can either gather compost in a small pile, or keep it contained in a bin or pen. You will need nitrogen or carbon rich organic waste, which can come from your own kitchen, as well as water, soil, and air.
- Add layers of carbon, which is composed of brown material (such as garden trimmings and leaves) with nitrogen (which is waste that is green in color, such as old leafy greens from the kitchen). After adding a few layers, top off your pile with a 4 to 6 inch layer of soil. In about 2 months, your compost should be ready to use as fertilizer.

**2 Water your plants regularly.** How much you water your plants does depend on the type of plant. As with other practices, consult a Farmer's Almanac or similar publication. However, there are a few general guidelines you can follow when it comes to watering your plants.<sup>[9]</sup>

- It's best to water in the morning. It tends to be cooler and less windy in the morning, giving the water the best chance to reach your plants.
- Water your plants at the roots. Watering at the greenery can cause damage.
- Younger plants may need to be watered a few times a week. Once plants are established, they may only need weekly watering. However, make sure to look into your plant's type before making a decision regarding watering.

**3 Weed your garden.** As you will not be relying on chemicals to reduce weeds in your garden, it will take a lot of work on your part to keep weeds at bay. You will have to manually weed your garden regularly to make sure your organic crops thrive.<sup>[10]</sup>

- To weed, you will have to go into your garden yourself and pull up any weeds at the roots. You may have to use tools, like a spade, and you should also wear gloves. If you can't bend over yourself, think about hiring

neighborhood kids to assist you with the gardening.

- Mulch, straw, and wood chips can be scattered around the base of plants to reduce the growth of weeds. Straw is the cheapest option, but does not last long. Wood chips are expensive, but may need replacing less frequently than other options. Avoid using lawn clippings on plants that do not require a lot of nutrients, as they're high in nitrogen. Lettuce and squash would benefit from lawn clippings.

**4 Keep your garden diverse.** This is a good way to naturally keep away pests. Growing a variety of plants keeps pests away as it limits the amount of one type of plant offered to pests. If you're able to, grow a great variety of plants in your garden. This will also provide you with greater options for customers when you begin to sell your produce and plants.<sup>[11]</sup>

- Remember to choose plants that will thrive given your climate and soil type.
- If you need inspiration about what plants to use, visit a local farmer's market again. You can ask local farmers for recommendations on crops you should add to your garden.

**5 Use natural means of discouraging pests.** Chemical pesticides are generally not used, or at least not used heavily, on organic farms. Explore natural options to deflect pests as you maintain your organic garden.<sup>[12]</sup>

- Leave a small source of water in your garden as this will attract natural predators for pests. A garden that contains frogs, birds, toads, and lizards can help ward off pests.
- Consider placing nets and row covers over your plants to keep pests out.
- Look into naturally occurring bacteria, horticultural oils, insecticidal soaps, and sprays made from garlic and hot peppers.
- Check to make sure your plants are getting enough light, nutrients, and moisture. Healthy plants are more able to fight off pests.

### Method 3

## Considering Training and Certification

**1 Try enrolling in a training program prior to starting your farm.** Colleges and universities may offer courses on organic farming. If you plan to farm for a profit, formal training can be a major asset. You also may find a local organic farm that offers training to farmers who are just getting started. As organic farming has a certain science behind it, training is a good idea if you're serious about starting your own organic farm.<sup>[13]</sup>

- You want to make sure you're able to grow a large amount of crops so you can sell them for profit. Training will teach you how to best assure your crops grow, and also tips about harvesting and packaging your crops for sale.
- Training is also an excellent networking opportunity. You will meet other aspiring farmers who can help you find a market for your crops. Many of your teachers may already farm professionally, and may have connections for you down the road.

**2 Look into the benefits of certification.** Certification programs will evaluate your farm and provide you with paperwork certifying your farm meets the standards of organic farming. Certification programs can be beneficial to your farm for a variety of reasons.<sup>[14]</sup>

- If you end up selling your products, you can use the USDA organic seal if your farm is certified as organic. This will give legitimacy to your products and make health conscious consumers feel safe buying from you. This seal is usually required if you're selling food labeled as organic.
- If you only give your consumers your word, they may be nervous about purchasing your crops. Certification shows you put the work in to make sure your crops are grown according to proper guidelines.

**3 Learn the process of becoming certified.** The process varies based on which program you're working with. You can get certified using a private, foreign, or state entity. Usually, you have to prove your farm meets United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) standards for organic farming practices.<sup>[15]</sup>

- There is usually an application process in which you will have to provide a detailed account of how you grow your crops. An agent will review your application and accept it if he feels your farm meets the correct

standards. Usually, there is also an on site inspection.

- There are often fees associated with getting certified, which can be costly. Fees vary greatly between organizations, so choose an organization within your price range to get certified.

**4 Look into alternative labels.** Many consumers and farmers disagree with the USDA standards for organic. Some farmers also do not have the time and money for certification. A program called Certified Naturally Grown provides easier certification for small scale farms. If it's difficult and costly for you to meet USDA requirements, consider certification via a grassroots program like this.<sup>[16]</sup>

- If you live in a smaller area, you can also try to be simply be upfront with consumers about your practices. A tiny farmer's market may operate more on word of mouth than official certification.

## Community Q&A

### How do I choose the healthiest seeds?



The healthiest seeds are usually the biggest and the ones with the most color still inside the 'shell' of the seed.

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## Tips

- Try volunteering to work on a local organic farm before starting your own. This will give you some experience in the field, making it easier for you to farm on your own time.

## Sources and Citations

1. <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/ofp/ofp.shtml>
2. <https://woodleaffarm.com/growing-peaches/>
3. <http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/home/gardening/advice/g2104/organic-gardening-tips-460309/>

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