



# How to Become an Organic Farmer

Three Parts: [Gaining Relevant Experience](#) [Creating an Organic System Plan](#) [Obtaining Certification](#)

While prospects in farming are on the decline in general, the demand for synthetic-free foods that haven't been genetically modified have actually encouraged the growth of organic farms. Both crops and livestock have been raised without artificial means for millenia. However, in the modern era, you need to have your farm inspected and officially certified as "organic" before you can market your products as such.

Part  
1

## Gaining Relevant Experience

**1 Learn what being “organic” entails.** Grow crops without the use of synthetic substances or genetic modification. Raise dairy herds and livestock with 100% organic feed, supplements, and medications. Expect a lengthy transition period from non-organic to organic farming before being able to market yourself as “certified organic.”<sup>[1]</sup>

- Non-GMO crops must be grown on land that hasn't been treated with synthetic chemicals, fertilizers, or pesticides for three full years before they can be considered organic.
- Dairy herds can be switched from non-organic to organic after a year-long transition that is supervised by a certifying agent.
- Poultry must be raised exclusively by organic means from their second day after hatching onward.
- The mothers of livestock must be treated only by organic means no later than the last trimester of pregnancy for the newborn to be considered organic.

**2 Get an entry-level position, apprenticeship, or internship.** Learn the ins and outs of organic farming by applying for a farmhand position on a certified organic farm. Condition yourself to the long hours and heavy labor demanded by this profession. Grow acquainted with the techniques used in organic farming. Familiarize yourself with the farm's calendar year in terms of planting, harvesting, and how best to utilize the time in between.<sup>[2]</sup>

- In lieu of working on an actual farm, working for a nursery or landscaping company can also teach you similar core concepts.
- Apprenticeships and internships can be found through the National Center for Appropriate Technology's ATTRA program.<sup>[3]</sup>

**3 Pursue a degree in agriculture.** Apply to colleges or universities that offer associate or bachelor's degrees in organic agriculture. Focus on such subjects as crop production, economics, farm marketing, food science, and soil management. Also join extracurricular clubs devoted to organic farming in order to gain as much firsthand experience as possible outside of the classroom.<sup>[4]</sup>

- California State University-Chico, Berea College, Dickinson College and University of Massachusetts-Amherst are among the top schools with certified organic farms.<sup>[5]</sup>
- Earning a degree is not a requirement for becoming an organic farmer. However, the education gained in the process will better prepare you for the challenges ahead.

**4 Sign up for farmers' business courses.** If you are unable to attend a two- or four-year program for a full degree, attend auxiliary programs designed specifically for farmers. Learn how to identify and utilize resources. Study how to build business plans, manage finances, and handle long-term investments.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

- Such courses are available in person, online, or in a combination of the two.
- When researching online schools, make sure that the course content pertains to your climate and region.

**Part  
2****Creating an Organic System Plan**

**1 Familiarize yourself with the application.** To certify your farm as organic, you will have to submit an Organic System Plan (OSP) to a certifying agent. Before you do, visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture's website to download the application itself.<sup>[8]</sup> Go to [ams.usda.gov](http://ams.usda.gov) and search for the "OSP Template."<sup>[9]</sup> Review the document to know the precise information required by certifying agents. Improve your chances of being approved in a timely fashion by including all information from the start.

- ATTRA's "Organic Systems Plans: Market Farming and Greenhouses" is a valued companion-piece that explains the application in detail.
- Repeat this step for each additional country that you intend to sell to. The United Nations have recommended guidelines for organic certification, but practices may still vary from country to country.<sup>[10]</sup>

**2 Research your land's history.** One important element of the application process is providing a list of substances used to treat soil and plants over the last three years.<sup>[11]</sup> If you have recently purchased your land or are in the process of doing so, be sure to ask the previous owners for this information. Factor this into your OSP's timeline.

- If the previous owners used substances that are not approved for organic certification, expect a longer wait before you can become certified yourself.

**3 Create an OSP.** Your specific plan will vary from others depending on your crop, livestock, the size of your farm, and other factors. In general, it should include all the practices you intend to use to farm your land.<sup>[12]</sup> Detail the following areas:<sup>[13]</sup>

- The exact procedures to be enacted, and how often.
- The substances that you will use at all levels of production.
- How you plan to supervise production to confirm that your OSP is enacted.
- Any methods used to prevent nearby non-organic farming from affecting your organic production.

**4 Contact a certifying agent.** Visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture's website ([ams.usda.gov](http://ams.usda.gov)) to find agents that have been accredited by the USDA's National Organic Program. Search by name, state, or country. Decide on an agent based on each one's fees and proximity.<sup>[14]</sup> Have them look over your OSP so you can make any necessary changes before you set it in motion.<sup>[15]</sup>

**5 Stay in communication.** Alert your certifying agent if you have to alter your OSP to address unexpected issues after you put it into practice. Always use written forms of communication, such as letters and emails, to create a physical record. Save all correspondence, especially confirmation of your changes, in case proof of such is required later on.<sup>[16]</sup>

- Keep in mind that your OSP is legally binding. Hang on to all relevant paperwork to protect yourself.

**Part  
3****Obtaining Certification**

**1 Have your farm inspected.** Assess your OSP's success. Based on your OSP's timeline, arrange with your agent for them or a third party to visit your farm. Have them investigate your operation thoroughly. Expect them to take samples of your soil and products, including tissue samples of livestock.<sup>[17]</sup>

- For crops, expect inspectors to focus on: the condition of your fields and soil; the health of your crops; weed- and pest-control; irrigation; storage facilities; equipment.
- For livestock, inspectors will look for: the quality, rations, and purchase history of animal feed; the animals' quality of life, including living situations, medical care, and overall health.

**2 Accept the agent's decision.** Receive your certification if you pass your inspection.<sup>[18]</sup> If not, make whatever changes are recommended by the agent. Arrange for a second inspection according to the presented timeline.

- 3 Reapply annually.** Maintain your organic certification by applying for recertification on a yearly basis. Arrange with your agent for follow-up inspections. Prove that your farm is still operating according to regulations.<sup>[19]</sup>

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### Tips

- Certification is only required if you expect to earn more than \$5,000 annually from your products.<sup>[20]</sup>

### Sources and Citations

1. <http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/AP/organic/BecomeCertifiedOrganic.html>
2. [http://study.com/articles/How\\_to\\_Become\\_an\\_Organic\\_Farmer\\_Education\\_and\\_Career\\_Roadmap.html](http://study.com/articles/How_to_Become_an_Organic_Farmer_Education_and_Career_Roadmap.html)
3. <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/internships/>

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