



WEST/SOUTHWEST  
TRANSITION TO ORGANIC  
PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM



# How to Go Organic

A Step-by-Step Guide to Transitioning to  
Organic Agriculture in California

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## **TRANSITION TO ORGANIC PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM**

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# Table of Contents

[p. 4 | Introduction](#)

[p. 5 | What is Organic Agriculture?](#)

[p. 7 | Why Grow Organic?](#)

[p. 10 | Best Organic Practices to Start Implementing](#)

[p. 13 | Soil Health](#)

[p. 14 | Cover Crop](#)

[p. 16 | Crop Rotation](#)

[p. 19 | Compost](#)

[p. 22 | Beneficial Insects and Plant Diversity](#)

[p. 26 | Pest and Disease Management](#)

[p. 27 | Organic Certification](#)

[p. 28 | What is Organic Certification?](#)

[p. 29 | Steps to Organic Certification](#)

[p. 35 | The Certification Process](#)

[p. 37 | Resources](#)

[p. 38 | Resource Links](#)

[p. 40 | Glossary](#)



## Introduction

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# Congratulations on starting your organic journey!

This change in practices will lead to a deeper understanding of your farm as you improve soil health, build a resilient farm ecosystem to control pests and diseases, improve crop quality, keep records to improve decision making, and more.





# What is Organic Agriculture?



## What is Organic Agriculture?

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**Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biology.**



# Why Grow Organic?



## Protect Farmer Health

Organic farmers, their employees, and their families are not exposed to toxic pesticides.



## Organic is Climate Smart

Organic practices sequester carbon in the soil and do not rely on fossil-fuel based agricultural chemicals.



## Protect Community Health

Organic Farms protect communities by decreasing harmful chemicals in food, soil, air, and water. **Organic farms create wealth in local communities.** Organic processed foods have fewer food additives.



# Why Grow Organic?



## Decrease Inputs and Costs

As soil fertility grows and farm biodiversity is enhanced, Organic farmers use fewer inputs to fertilize crops and combat pests. **Crop quality and yields may increase.**



## Access New Markets

**Demand for certified Organic products is growing.** Organic certification can lead to new markets and better prices.



## Protect Ecosystems

Organic farms create habitat for beneficial insects and other species. They keep toxic chemicals out of our water supply. Healthy ecosystems build farm resilience like drought resistance, and reduced crop stress.

# How to Use This Guide

Follow this guide to become a certified organic farm.

## 1. Find Eligible Land

To qualify for certification, land must be free of materials prohibited in organic for three consecutive years. Record the last date that a **material prohibited in organic** was applied on the land.

## 2. Start Using Organic Practices

Improve soil health with compost, cover crops, and crop rotation. Build a healthy farm ecosystem by growing habitat for beneficial insects. Keep records of farm activities and inputs. Use inputs allowed for use in organic and document all input purchases and applications. Begin organic management of the farm. Ensure all materials applied now and in future (fertilizers, pest control sprays, etc.) are **allowed for use** in organic agriculture.

## 3. Learn About Organic Certification

Research organic regulations, talk with other organic farmers and farm service providers to understand the requirements. Select an organic certifier.

## 4. Get Certified!

Write an Organic System Plan to document how your farm adheres to organic regulation. Submit an application for certification. Organize farm records and prepare for your first inspection.





# Best Organic Practices to Start Implementing



# Best Organic Practices to Start Implementing

## Soil Health

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### Compost

Spreading 6–12 tons of compost per acre adds organic matter, builds soil biology, and provides nutrients to the crop. Using compost can minimize chemical inputs while enhancing the soil's natural fertility.

#### References

- [Farmers.gov: Soil Health](#)
- [USDA AMS: Crop Standards](#)
- [Rodale Institute: Organic Farming Practices](#)

### Crop Rotation

Cycling different crops improves soil health, protects against erosion, and is an important strategy to manage pests, diseases, and weeds. Crop rotation can increase crop yield while reducing the need for fertilizer and pesticide inputs.

### Cover Crops

Cover crops build soil organic matter, improve water retention, and supply cash crops with critical nutrients like nitrogen. Cover crops are an essential tool for promoting soil biology and unlocking soil fertility. They suppress weeds, create habitat for beneficial insects, and prevent soil erosion in the rainy season.



# Best Organic Practices to Start Implementing

## Biodiversity

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### Beneficial Insects and Plant Diversity

Planting a diversity of crops, flowers, and plants attracts beneficial insects that can naturally manage pests. This practice helps disrupt pest cycles and promotes ecological balance within the farm system. It also encourages plant diversity, which is one of the core NRCS\* soil health principles for creating a resilient farming ecosystem.

#### References

- [Farmers.gov: Soil Health](#)
- [USDA AMS: Crop Standards](#)
- [Rodale Institute: Organic Farming Practices](#)



\***NRCS** stands for the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service. There is an NRCS office serving every county in the United States. [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov)





Best Organic Practices to  
Start Implementing

# Soil Health



# Cover Crop

## Benefits

- ☀ Provide a source of nitrogen for the subsequent crop
- ☀ Build soil organic matter
- ☀ Improve soil biology
- ☀ Protect from erosion
- ☀ Increase water absorption
- ☀ Improve soil structure

## How to Grow Cover Crops

Determine best cover crops for your area and your production system. In California, it is common to plant cover crop in fall when it can be irrigated by rain and protect the soil from erosion throughout the wet season.

Choose a “soil builder” mix that provides nitrogen via legumes like vetch, peas, and bell beans, and adds organic matter with high biomass cereals like oats and rye.

Seed at a rate of 100 pounds (or more) per acre to ensure a thick stand of cover crop. Mow and incorporate the cover crop into the soil in spring before the plants set seeds. Allow the cover crop to decompose in the soil for two weeks or more before planting a main crop.



## Soil Health

# Cover Crop

Cover crop can provide over a 100 lbs/acre of nitrogen (N) for the subsequent crop. The carbon to nitrogen (C:N) ratio and the quantity of the cover crop biomass determines the plant-available N. The lower the C:N ratio, the more plant-available N is provided, while a higher C:N ratio risks tying up N in the soil. Repeated cover cropping will build soil organic matter, which slowly releases additional N over time.

A common cover crop mix grown in winter in California contains vetch, peas, bell beans, and oats. Summer cover crops include sorghum-sudangrass, cow peas, and buckwheat. Most summer cover crops require irrigation. Legumes in cover crops produce more nitrogen with the addition of Rhizobium bacteria inoculant. Ask seed providers for options.



*Vicia villosa*, aka hairy vetch

### Learn more about growing cover crop:

- ☀️ [ATTRA: Overview of Cover Crop](#)
- ☀️ [How Much Nitrogen is in Your Cover Crop?](#)

## Soil Health

# Crop Rotation

### What is Crop Rotation?

Crop rotation is the practice of planting different crops in a field or planting bed in a planned sequence each year or over a set period.

In organic systems, this technique is critical for maintaining soil health, breaking pest and disease cycles, and managing plant nutrition. Crop rotation is a reliable method of managing and improving soil health (a requirement of organic certification.)

### Benefits

- ☀ Improves soil fertility
- ☀ Disrupts pest and disease cycles
- ☀ Increases biodiversity



## Soil Health

# Crop Rotation - Annual

### How to Implement Crop Rotation in Annual Systems

- 1. Identify crop family & understand plant nutrient needs:** Rotate heavy feeders with light feeders, and with nitrogen-fixing crops (like legumes) and biomass building crops (like cereals).
- 2. Incorporate cover crops into yearly rotation.**
- 3. Plan by the season.**
- 4. Monitor pest and disease cycles:** Crop rotation helps to break cycles of pest & diseases. Alternate root crops (like carrots) with crops that grow above ground (like beans) to reduce soilborne pathogens.

### Year 1 Example:



### Helpful Resources

- ☀ [ATTRA: Crop Rotation in Org Farming Systems \(PDF\)](#)
- ☀ [SARE: Crop Rotation on Organic Farms \(PDF\)](#)
- ☀ [UC ANR: Solution Center for Nutrient Management](#)

## Soil Health

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# Crop Rotation - Perennial

Increased plant diversity in orchard and other perennial systems aids pest and disease management, builds soil health, and protects exposed ground from erosion.

### Helpful Resource

- ☀ [USDA AMS: Crop Rotation Practice Standard](#)
- ☀ [USDA NRCS: Alley Cropping \(PDF\)](#)
- ☀ [UCSAREP Expert Grower Database: Cover Cropping Practices in Orchards and Vinyards](#)

## How to Implement Crop Rotation in Perennial Systems:

- ☀ Use practices like alley cropping to grow a diversity of plants between primary crops.
- ☀ Grow a diversity of plants as a permanent ground cover and use organic practices like mowing or flame weeding to manage the orchard floor for harvest time.
- ☀ Implement longer crop rotation in perennial systems such as orchard crops. When the field is taken out of production, plant with another crop that builds the soil and breaks disease cycles.



# Compost

## Benefits

- ☀ Provide a source of nitrogen for subsequent crop
- ☀ Build soil organic matter
- ☀ Improve soil biology
- ☀ Protect from erosion / Increase water absorption
- ☀ Improve soil structure

## How to Add Compost

Apply compost at a rate of 6-12 tons per acre to add organic matter and build soil.

Search locally for compost that is allowed for use in organic production. Check to see if compost is allowed for use by searching the OMRI list and checking with your certifier. Add in spring or fall and spread evenly on your organic fields each season.

Follow National Organic Program guidance for compost that is made on the farm. It must be made from allowable, non-synthetic feedstocks and must be managed to reach temperatures of 131-170 degrees F for 15 consecutive days, and turned 5 times during that period.

## Helpful Resources:

- ☀ [ATTRA How to Add Compost on Your Small Farm](#)
- ☀ [USDA: Compost in Organic Crop Production](#)



## Soil Health

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# Compost

### Tips for Adding Compost

Apply compost in spring as both a source of organic matter and nitrogen fertilizer. Consider the timing of compost applications based on factors like geography, soil needs, crop nutrition, and climate.

Many compost providers will also spread the compost on fields. If not, obtain a manure spreader, tow behind the tractor and apply at 6-12 tons per acre.

The benefits of compost compound over time as you build organic matter in the soil from multiple applications.



# Compost Boosts Biological Activity

- ☀️ **Organic Matter Supply:** Compost is rich in organic matter, which serves as food for soil organisms like bacteria, fungi, protozoa, nematodes, and earthworms.
- ☀️ **Microbial Inoculation:** Compost often contains its own diverse microbial populations, which can colonize and enrich the soil microbiome.
- ☀️ **Improved Soil Structure:** Better structure means more air and water movement, which supports aerobic microbes and root growth.
- ☀️ **Nutrient Cycling:** Microbes in compost help break down organic materials into plant-available nutrients, enhancing nutrient cycling and soil fertility.
- ☀️ **Disease Suppression:** Some beneficial microbes in compost can outcompete or inhibit soil pathogens, improving plant health.





Best Organic Practices to  
Start Implementing

# Beneficial Insects and Plant Diversity



Biodiversity

# Beneficial Insects and Plant Diversity

Beneficial insects, such as ladybugs, lacewings, and parasitic wasps, play a crucial role in managing pest populations naturally.

You can increase populations of these helpful insects on your farm by growing a diversity of plants including flowers and permanent hedgerows. Beneficial insects will prey upon pest insects providing a natural pest control on the farm.



## Benefits

- ☀ **Natural pest control** through predation and parasitism
- ☀ **Improved pollination** of crops and flowering plants
- ☀ **Enhanced ecosystem** balance and resilience

## Biodiversity

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# Beneficial Insects and Plant Diversity

Beneficial insects provide control for different pests and at different life cycle stages. Learn to identify insects and larvae on your farm and grow them the nectar, pollen, and habitat they need to reproduce.

### Helpful Resources

- ☀ [UC ANR IPM: Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program](#)
- ☀ [SARE: Strategies to Enhance Beneficials](#)



A Syrphid Fly landing on an alyssum flower.  
Photo credit Epic Gardening

Biodiversity

# Beneficial Insects and Plant Diversity

Maximizing plant diversity by incorporating a variety of crops and flowers encourages a thriving ecosystem. This diversity supports beneficial insects, which help with natural pest management and pollination.

Additionally, planting hedgerows - strips of native and perennial vegetation - provides shelter and food for beneficial insects and birds, improving biodiversity on the farm.

## Helpful Resource:

 [CCAF: Hedgerows and Farmscaping](#)

## How to Promote Beneficial Insects and Plant Diversity

- 1. Plant diverse crops & flowers**
- 2. Limit pesticide use\***
- 3. Create insect habitats**
- 4. Plant hedgerows**

*\*Check the Organic Materials Review Institute for info on materials approved for organic agriculture. Always check with your certifier before using a new input.*



# Pest and Disease Management



## Integrated Pest Management

Research pest control strategies. Follow the organic recommendations in the UC IPM Manual: [ipm.ucanr.edu](http://ipm.ucanr.edu)



## Use Flowers to Attract Beneficial Insects

Plant flowers intercropped with main crop or on field edges provide natural pest control. [Wild Farm Alliance](#)



## Add all Materials to Your Materials List Before Use

Ensure all materials are allowed for in Organic use before applying. [OMRI Search](#)



## Practice Field Sanitation and Crop Rotation

Remove fruit that can harbor pests and disease. Rotate crops to avoid potential for plant disease.



# Organic Certification



# What is Organic Certification?

Organic Certification is a system regulated by the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) that verifies that a farm or processing facility is adhering to a set of federal laws – the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990.

Organic certifiers are given permission by the USDA to verify and approve organic farms and give approved producers the ability to use the Organic logo and the word “organic” on products.



USDA Organic Seal

## Steps to Organic Certification

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# Step 1: Set an Organic Transition Timeline

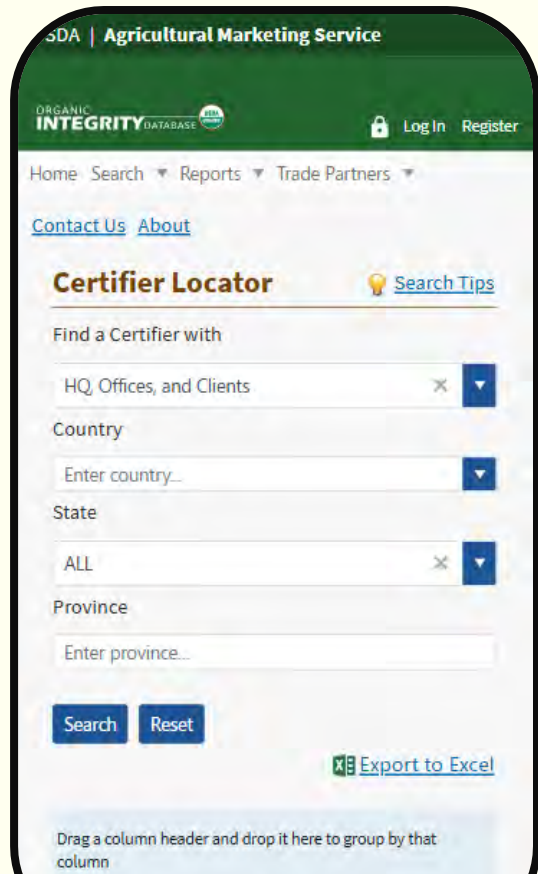
1. Learn about the [USDA Organic Rule](#) and [what certified organic means](#). Watch [videos online](#) and attend workshops if possible. Find helpful [mentors](#).
2. Understand [which inputs are allowed in organic agriculture](#). Use of a prohibited material requires a **three-year transition** before an organic crop can be harvested and sold. Determine and document the last day a prohibited material was applied to the land (if ever.)
3. Start farming with organic practices. Grow cover crops, apply compost, and create habitat for beneficial insects. Talk to other farmers, [extension](#), or other technical assistance for support.
4. Refer to the [CCOF Recordkeeping Checklist for Organic Growers \(PDF\)](#) and start improving farm record-keeping systems.



## Steps to Organic Certification

# Step 2: Choose a Certifier

- 1. Select a third-party certifier.** There are over 80 certifying bodies in the U.S. and each has a unique Organic System Plan template, certification process, and fee structure.
  - Use the USDA Organic INTEGRITY Database [Organic Certifier Locator](#) tool, which is regularly updated by the National Organic Program.
  - Community Alliance with Family Farmers, [caff.org](#) has an [online tool](#) that compares different organic certifiers.



The screenshot shows the USDA Organic INTEGRITY Database website. The page title is "Organic Certifier Locator" with a "Search Tips" link. The search criteria are: "Find a Certifier with" (dropdown menu), "HQ, Offices, and Clients" (dropdown menu), "Country" (text input field), "State" (dropdown menu), "Province" (text input field), and "ALL" (dropdown menu). There are "Search" and "Reset" buttons, and an "Export to Excel" link. The USDA Organic logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the screenshot.

## Steps to Organic Certification

# Step 2: Choose a Certifier

- 2. In California, register** with the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) State Organic Program. This registration is a required state regulation.
- 3. Request an application packet** and Organic System Plan template from your chosen certifier. Many certifiers will provide these documents at no obligation.

**Register with the CDFA State Organic Program:**

 [organic.cdfa.ca.gov/OrganicReg/](https://organic.cdfa.ca.gov/OrganicReg/)



## Steps to Organic Certification

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# Step 3: Create an Organic System Plan (OSP)

- 1. Complete an Organic System Plan (OSP)** and application for certification. An Organic System Plan details how farm operations are in compliance with organic regulations. Farm records show how the OSP is being followed in the day-to-day activities at the farm and trace organic crops from seed to sale.
- 2. Each certifier has a unique OSP.** Contact certifier to access templates and other **supporting documents**.



## Steps to Organic Certification

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# Step 3: Create an Organic System Plan (OSP)

3. Find a technical assistance provider to help with the OSP:
  - **Join weekly, free organic office hours** to get your questions answered! Hosted by an organic expert, on Zoom. Learn about organic certification, OSPs, and more. All experience levels are welcome! Visit the [CCOF Events Page](#) to learn more.
  - Find Organic technical assistance and other services: [UC ANR, UC Organic Agriculture Institute: Resources](#)



# Step 4: Get Certified Organic!

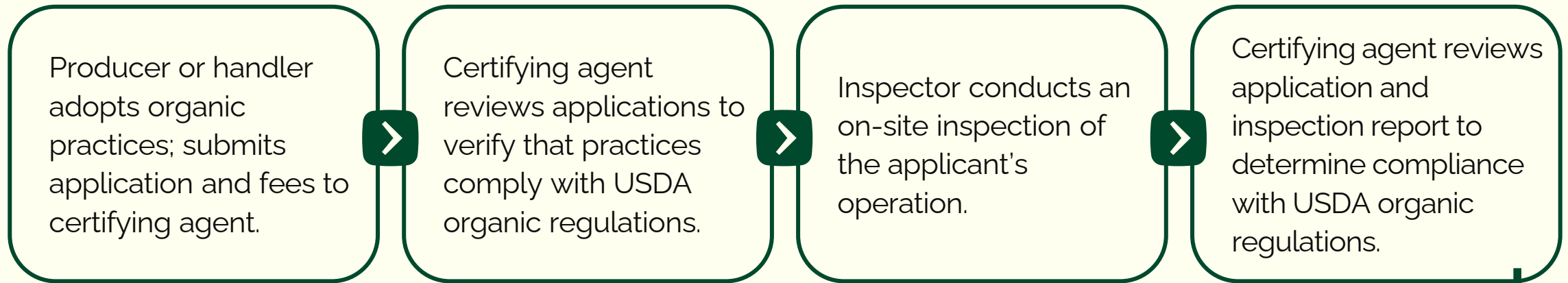


- 1. Submit a completed OSP and application** to a certifier. Some certifiers may require an application fee.
  - After review of the OSP, certifiers will request any missing information. Upon resolution, the certifier then schedule an inspection.
- 2. Prepare for inspection:** Organize paperwork including production and audit trail records.
  - Certifier contacts farmer for any follow up and bills for the cost of inspection.
- 3. Certification is granted!** Products and labels can include the USDA Organic Seal and certifier logo.
  - Labels must be reviewed by certifiers before printing.
- 4. To maintain certification,** farm inspections must occur every year, OSPs must be updated, and annual fees to certifiers must be paid.

## Steps to Organic Certification

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### The Certification Process



### Annual Recertification Process





# Thank You!

For any questions reach out at:

[ccoffoundation@ccof.org](mailto:ccoffoundation@ccof.org)





# Resources



## Resources Links (A-Q)

- ☀ [ATTRA: Crop Rotation in Organic Farming Systems \(PDF\)](#)
- ☀ [ATTRA: How to Add Compost on Your Small Farm](#)
- ☀ [CAFF: Community Alliance with Family Farmers](#)
- ☀ [CAFF: Hedgerows and Farmscaping](#)
- ☀ [CAFF: Organic Certifier Searchable Comparison Tool](#)
- ☀ [CalCAN: Long-term Soil Strategies Drive Many Environmental Benefits at Park Farming Organics](#)
- ☀ [CCOF: California Certified Organic Farmers](#)
- ☀ [CCOF: Events](#)
- ☀ [CCOF: Organic Certification Process \(Youtube Playlist\)](#)
- ☀ [CCOF: Part One—Roadmap to an Organic California: Benefits Report](#)
- ☀ [CCOF: Recordkeeping Checklist for Growers \(PDF\)](#)
- ☀ [CCOF: Webinar - Organic Recordkeeping 101 for Growers \(Youtube\)](#)
- ☀ [CDFA: California Department of Food and Agriculture Organic Program Registration](#)
- ☀ [Farmers.gov: Soil Health](#)
- ☀ [OMRI: Organic Materials Review Institute](#)
- ☀ [Oregon State University: Agricultural Composting and Water Quality](#)
- ☀ [OTA: Organic Trade Association Organic Market Report](#)



## Resources Links (R-Z)

- ☀ [Rodale Institute: Organic Farming Practices](#)
- ☀ [SARE: Crop Rotation on Organic Farms - A Planning Manual \(PDF\)](#)
- ☀ [SARE: Strategies to Enhance Beneficials](#)
- ☀ [UC ANR IPM: Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program](#)
- ☀ [UC ANR: Solution Center for Nutrient Management](#)
- ☀ [UC ANR, UC Organic Agriculture Institute: Resources](#)
- ☀ [UC ANR: University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources](#)
- ☀ [UCCE: How Much Nitrogen is in Your Cover Crop?](#)
- ☀ [UCSAREP Expert Grower Database: Cover Cropping Practices in Orchards and Vineyards](#)
- ☀ [USDA AMS: Crop Rotation Practice Standard](#)
- ☀ [USDA AMS: Crop Standards](#)
- ☀ [USDA AMS: National Organic Program](#)
- ☀ [USDA AMS: Organic Integrity Database: Organic Certifier Locator Tool](#)
- ☀ [USDA AMS: Organic Practices Fact Sheet \(PDF\)](#)
- ☀ [USDA AMS: The National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances](#)
- ☀ [USDA NRCS: Alley Cropping \(PDF\)](#)
- ☀ [USDA: Compost Standards](#)
- ☀ [USDA NRCS: Natural Resources Conservation Service](#)
- ☀ [USDA Transition to Organic Partnership Program \(TOPP\)](#)
- ☀ [Wild Farm Alliance](#)



# Glossary of Terms

**Certified Organic:** Products that have been produced and processed according to strict organic standards, verified by a third-party certification body.

**Organic Standards:** Regulations outlining the practices allowed in organic production and processing, including restrictions on synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, and genetically modified organisms.

**Certification Body:** An independent organization accredited to verify that producers and processors comply with organic standards.

**Organic Label:** A label indicating that a product has been certified organic, often featuring the logo of the certification body and the USDA organic seal.

**Transitional Organic:** Products from farms or businesses in the process of converting to organic production, but not yet fully certified.

**Organic Integrity:** Maintaining the purity and authenticity of organic products throughout the supply chain.

**Traceability:** The ability to track the movement of organic products from farm to consumer, ensuring transparency and accountability.

**Organic Farming:** An agricultural system that promotes ecological balance, biodiversity, and soil health through practices such as crop rotation, composting, and natural pest control.

**Organic Processing:** Handling and transforming organic raw materials into finished products without the use of synthetic additives or processing aids.

**Organic Ingredients:** Raw materials used in organic products that have been certified organic themselves.