Organic growing and the role of compost



What is organic growing?

The simplest explanation of organic growing is farming without the use of synthetic chemicals or genetically modified organisms. In the case of animal farming, only free-range animal systems can be classed as organic.

The lack of chemical use is the most widely known aspect of organic growing. However, organic growing is also about creating a natural production system where greater above and below ground biodiversity supports plant and animal health. In a healthy ecosystem nature does the hard work and artificial chemicals are not needed - healthy soil is central to the success of organic farming.

In order to use the term "certified organic", produce must be grown, harvested, prepared and transported in systems that can guarantee the produce has not come into contact with any synthetic chemicals. All of these systems must be certified organic by a registered certifying body. There are also Australian and international standards which must be met depending on the target market of produce.



What are the benefits of organic growing?

Organic produce is increasingly sought after by consumers and it is one of the fastest growing markets. This trend looks set to continue with a strong demand for organic produce in both domestic and international markets. Organic growers also seem to have a better relationship with their markets than conventional farmers, regardless of the farm size.

- Other key benefits of organic growing are:
- higher quality of produce,
- lack of chemical exposure to farmers, staff and the environment,
- improvements in the physical resources of the farm, such as the soil,
- increased sustainability of the agricultural system.



Deciding to "go organic"

If you are thinking about changing to an organic production system it's a good idea to have a look at the organic growing standards. There will be different standards for different markets e.g. domestic and international, but a good place to start is with the "National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce". This standard provides information on the minimum requirements for producing, processing Quarantine and Inspection Service website (http://www.daff.gov.au/aqis/ export/organic-bio-dynamic). This will give you an idea of the changes you might need to make on your property to achieve organic certification.

Talking to current organic farmers is also a great idea. They can give you a first hand account of their successes (and mistakes!) and help you to get a good perspective on what going organic may mean for you. You might decide to convert your whole operation or just start with a smaller section of your farm. Research your markets to make sure you can be competitive and think about any new equipment, tools or labour you might need if you decide to go organic. Many growers say that finding information on how to go organic is one of the hardest tasks. Talking to other growers will help give you a head start in this area and we've included some links to resources at the end of this fact sheet to point you in the right direction.

How do you "go organic"?

Once you've decided to change from conventional to organic farming you will need to undergo conversion and certification. At this stage you will need to choose a certifying body and apply for organic certification. There are seven AQIS approved certifying organisations to choose from (http://www.daff.gov.au/aqis/about/contact/aco).

Conversion is the general term used to describe the steps involved in going organic and these steps occur over a period of time. A conversion period is necessary for a number of reasons. This time allows for the development of a holistic farming system, breakdown of any chemical residues and development of a healthy soil ecosystem, which is central to the success of organic production. The conversion period also allows a period of supervision by a certifying body and protects genuine organic growers (and consumers) from others seeking short term profits. For primary producers a conversion period of 3 years of consecutive organic farm management is needed before they can be certified organic.

There are three main certification stages during conversion; pre-certification, in conversion and certified organic.

Pre-certification

The pre-certification period lasts for 12 months and begins at the time of your application. During pre-certification you will undergo two inspections by your certifying body but you cannot use the certified organic label on produce.

This is a good time to develop your conversion and organic management plans in conjunction with your certifying body and make sure that accurate record keeping systems are in place to make the certification process easier.

In-conversion

To complete this stage you will need to have conformed to the Organic Standards for a minimum of 12 months (verified by a certifying body) or 24 months if the land history of your farm cannot be established. You can use an

Before you "go organic" it's a good idea to check...

- is there a market for your produce?
- what are the national standards?
- what changes will you need to make to meet them?
- will you need any extra equipment or labour?
- do you know where to find good information and support?

What is a certifying body? A certifying body

is an organisation registered and accredited to assess the compliance of organic farming and production systems. A certifying body must assess and monitor your system before you can be classified as organic.

Certified Organic

To be certified organic, you must have met the Organic Standards for a minimum period of 36 consecutive months, and have this verified by a certifying body. After this period you can use a "Certified Organic" label.

Many growers approach the conversion process with the idea that they will just need to find organic substitutes for the synthetic chemicals they have been using on their farm. This may be true initially but your whole system will change during the conversion process. An organic system will have different needs than conventional systems and simple substitution will not always be the best option.

For example, you may have applied non-organic fertilisers to your soil for many years and look to find an organic substitute but during the conversion process you've applied compost to improve your soil quality. Compost contains nutrients that will benefit your soil but it also increases biological activity. As biological activity in the soil increases, nutrients locked in the soil from previous fertiliser applications become available and you may not need to apply any fertilisers at all!

Similarly instead of looking for a substitute for the fungicides or insecticides you would routinely apply, you might have different fungal or insect pest problems as you convert or you may have no problems at all.

It will take some time to get to know your new organic system and the different benefits and problems as they take shape.





How can compost help your conversion?

Compost is an essential part of organic production. Healthy soil is the key to any organic production and compost will improve almost every measure of soil quality and health. Compost can help your conversion to organic farming by quickly improving the health of your soil. Once the soil is on the right track then you will begin to reap the benefits of a good organic system.

Increased organic matter in the soil will improve soil structure and increase the water holding capacity and water infiltration rate of your soil. Compost can help the soil to manage your water more efficiently and effectively and help protect your plants during drought and times of stress. Nutrient availability is improved with compost application and the release of nutrients can be more in step with the needs of your plants. Healthy plants have a stronger immune system and are more able to cope with insect and disease attack.

As well as improving soil nutrition, compost can play a direct role in suppressing plant diseases. Compost introduces a range of bacteria and fungi into your soil that can help minimise the impact of disease causing organisms. Compost can also provide habitat and food for natural enemies of many insect pests. A healthy soil ecosystem plays an important role in pest and disease management - let compost and nature do the work for you!

Compost can....

- increase yield
- improve water efficiency
- help to reduce pest and diseases
- improve soil structure
- improve soil health

Benefits of organic farming

- strong, growing market for produce
- higher quality of produce
- no chemical exposure of farmers, staff and the environment
- improved farm resources
- increased sustainability

Compost = healthy soil = healthy plants = healthy animals



An initiative of Compost Australia

For more information and a list of quality suppliers, go to

www.compostforsoils.com.au