

GLEXPO 2024 – Organic Session, Meet and Greet—Gaining Insight to Build Your Farm  
Wednesday, December 11, 2024

### Transitioning Apple Orchards/Farm to Organic

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- **Land Acquisition** – In December 2006, my husband and I bought a small 15-acre farm with 6.5 acres of overgrown apple trees, which were conventionally grown. Wanting the cleanest, safest fruit, we decided to transition to organic growing practices.
- In addition to the orchard, we have a two-acre vegetable plot and planted an acre of blueberries in 2013.
- **Why are blueberries a “gift” organically?**
- **Where to go first?** Thanks to MSU’s extensive online resources, and conversations with our local Extension Service personnel, we found the procedures for restoring an orchard and also guidance to organic certification. <http://msue.anr.msu.edu/topic/info/apples>,
- **Choosing a certifier** – Searching for information and resources online, we found the NOP (National Organic Practices) rules and list of organic certifiers.
- **How did we decide on a certifier?**
- Because the orchard had been conventionally maintained, we had to wait three years to become certified organic. During that period, we had to keep records of inputs/treatments in accordance with NOP standards. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic> Our certifier, OCIA referred us to OMRI (Organic Materials Review Institute) that lists acceptable materials for organic operations. <https://www.omri.org>
- **Existing Orchard** – since we had to wait three years for certification because the trees had been non-organically managed, we had Extension Service personnel visit: heavy pruning over several years was needed to thin and bring the trees down to proper size. Soil tests were done to determine nutritional needs of the trees. Our orchard floor ground cover is pretty diverse, so we just have to keep it mowed occasionally and lay mulch down in the fall after leaf fall.
- **Update:** In 2013, we took out 1/3 of the orchard and planted more popular apple tree varieties that had better root stock in a trellised system, which allowed more trees to be planted per acre. In 2024, we removed the old Golden Delicious trees.
- **Should we have removed the old trees sooner?**
- **Orchard: what do I do when??** Invaluable to our understanding, including an organic fruit maturity timeline, are the following books by organic apple grower **Michael Phillips**: “The Apple Grower, A Guide for the Organic Orchardist” and “The Holistic Orchard, Tree Fruits and Berries the Biological Way”
- **Financial/Educational Assistance:** Again, through Extension and local farmer groups MOFFA (Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance) and MIFFS (Michigan Food and Farming Systems), we learned about Federal and State Agency Grant/Cost Share/financial assistance programs: First, we had to register our farm with the Farm Service Agency in our county before applying for conservation service programs and cost-share EQIP, AWEP, TAP and CSP programs: <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/outreach-and-education/help-for-organic-farming/index>  
For conservation service programs, we contacted our local **USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service** field office and discussed our goals and developed a conservation plan that provided access to financial assistance/grant programs: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home>.

**MAEAP:** Michigan offers a voluntary verification program to help farmers prevent or minimize agricultural pollution and food safety risks offered through MAEAP (The Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program) <http://www.maeap.org>. We completed this process and have a MAEAP verified farm since 2009.

**Why was participating in MAEAP verification helpful?**

I bring up these agencies because these programs have worked hand in hand with our organic certification procedures and have provided some financial assistance as we learned. Each program is very detailed in procedures, increasing our knowledge of all aspects of farming.

- **Selling at Markets** during organic transition. Our experience has shown that most of our customers know that “transitioning to organic” means you are following NOP standards until you are certified organic. Since certification in 2010, we have been able to sell our produce approximately 25% - 30% above conventional produce prices.