



Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market EXPO Michigan Greenhouse Growers EXPO

December 5-7, 2017

DeVos Place Convention Center, Grand Rapids, MI



Organic Production - Where to Start?

Where: Gallery Overlook (upper level) Room F

MI Recertification credits: 2 (1B, 1C, COMM CORE, PRIV CORE)

CCA Credits: CM(2.5)

Moderator: Vicki Morrone, Outreach Specialist for Organic Fruit and Vegetable Growers, MSU

- 9:00 am Is Organic Certification for You?
- Vicki Morrone, Outreach Specialist for Organic Fruit and Vegetable Growers, MSU
- 9:20 am Organic Transplants - Growing Your Own and Even for Others
- Matt Kleinhenz, Extension Vegetable Specialist, Horticulture & Crop Science Dept., The Ohio State Univ.
 - Rebecca Titus, Titus Farms, Leslie, MI
- 10:00 am Transitioning Apple Orchards: A Round Table Discussion
- Julie Studier, Tower Hill Farm, Sodus, MI
 - Tom Rosenfield, Earth First Farms, Berrien Center, MI
 - Aaron Molter, Molter Family Orchards, Benton Harbor, MI
- 11:30 am Session Ends

Transitioning Apple Orchards to Organic – a Round Table Discussion

Julie Studier, Tower Hill Farm, Sodus, Michigan, 269-944-5063, jnstudier@yahoo.com

- **Land Acquisition** – In December 2006, my husband and I bought a small farm with 6.5 acres of overgrown apple trees, which were conventionally grown. Wanting the cleanest, safest fruit, we decided to transition the orchard to organic. However, neither of us were farmers, just back-yard gardeners.
- **Where to go first?** Thanks to MSU's extensive online resources, and many 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. We interviewed several and decided on OCIA because of their reasonable costs and readily available personnel to answer questions and guide us. During the three transition years, we just had to keep records of inputs/treatments to be sure they met NOP standards. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic> OCIA referred us to OMRI (Organic Materials Review Institute) who list 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.
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: 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 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>.
Also, Michigan offers a voluntary verification program to help farmers prevent or minimize agricultural pollution risks through MAEAP (The Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program) <http://www.maeap.org>. We completed this process and now are a MAEAP verified farm.
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.
- **New Orchard:** Since the majority of our 25-year-old orchard was old root stock subject to heavy watersprouting and not very disease resistant, Extension advised us to remove 1/3 of old trees for new varieties with better root stock. Again, soil testing, plowing, seeding cover crops that would benefit the new trees, and tilling in soil amendments before planting of new trees was done. Using a trellising system which trains the trees horizontally to wires, we were able to plant more

trees per acre, providing more light and air circulation, in addition to additional fruit crop. We use landscape fabric with mulch on top, but hand weeding around the trunks is still needed a couple times a year. Check with your local tree services, who may be willing to provide you with free mulch.

New Trees: NOP requires organic stock, if possible. However, if a search from suppliers does not find organically-grown trees, conventionally-grown trees can be used, but a three-year transition period is required. Again, Extension Service can guide you on the root stock/scion that's best for our region. That's what we did. It all worked out, because like most perennials, the trees need three years in the ground to promote roots and shoots, removing blossoms during those initial years.

- **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. In addition to selling apples and cider, we have a two-acre vegetable plot, and an acre of blueberries.