

APPLICATIONS

Crop Diversity:

Crop diversity is a distinctive characteristic of organic farming. Conventional farming focuses on mass production of one crop in one location, a practice called monoculture. The science of agroecology has revealed the benefits of polyculture (multiple crops in the same space), which is often employed in organic farming. Planting a variety of vegetable crops supports a wider range of beneficial insects, soil microorganisms, and other factors that add up to overall farm health. Crop diversity helps environments thrive and protects species from going extinct.

Soil Management:

Organic farming relies heavily on the natural breakdown of organic matter, using techniques like green manure and composting, to replace nutrients taken from the soil by previous crops. This biological process, driven by microorganisms such as mycorrhiza, allows the natural production of nutrients in the soil throughout the growing season, and has been referred to as *feeding the soil to feed the plant*. Organic farming uses a variety of methods to improve soil fertility, including crop rotation, cover cropping, reduced tillage, and application of compost. By reducing tillage, soil is not inverted and exposed to air; less carbon is lost to the atmosphere resulting in more soil organic carbon. This has an added benefit of carbon sequestration, which can reduce greenhouse gases and help reverse climate change.

Plants need nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, as well as micronutrients and symbiotic relationships with fungi and other organisms to flourish, but getting enough nitrogen, and particularly synchronization so that plants get enough nitrogen at the right time (when plants need it most), is a challenge for organic farmers. Crop rotation and green manure ("cover crops") help to provide nitrogen through legumes (more precisely, the *Fabaceae* family), which fix nitrogen from the atmosphere through symbiosis with rhizobia bacteria. Intercropping, which is sometimes used for insect and disease control, can also increase soil nutrients, but the competition between the legume and the crop can be problematic and wider spacing between crop rows is required. Crop residues can be ploughed back into the soil, and different plants leave different amounts of nitrogen, potentially aiding synchronization. Organic farmers also use animal manure, certain processed fertilizers such as seed meal and various mineral powders such as rock phosphate and green sand, a naturally occurring form of potash that provides potassium. Together these methods help to control erosion. In some cases pH may need to be amended. Natural pH amendments include lime and sulfur, but in the U.S. some compounds such as iron sulfate, aluminum sulfate, magnesium sulfate, and soluble boron products are allowed in organic farming.

Mixed farms with both livestock and crops can operate as ley farms, whereby the land gathers fertility through growing nitrogen-fixing forage grasses such as white clover or alfalfa and grows cash crops or cereals when fertility is established. Farms without livestock ("stockless") may find it more difficult to maintain soil fertility, and may rely more on external inputs such as imported manure as well as grain legumes and green manures, although grain legumes may fix limited nitrogen because they are harvested. Horticultural farms that grow fruits and vegetables in protected conditions often rely even more on external inputs.

Biological research into soil and soil organisms has proven beneficial to organic farming. Varieties of bacteria and fungi break down chemicals, plant matter and animal waste into productive soil nutrients. In turn, they produce benefits of healthier yields and more productive soil for future crops. Fields with less or no manure display significantly lower yields, due to decreased soil microbe community. Increased manure improves biological activity, providing a healthier, more arable soil system and higher yields.

Weed Management:

Organic weed management promotes weed suppression, rather than weed elimination, by enhancing crop competition and phytotoxic effects on weeds. Organic farmers integrate cultural, biological, mechanical, physical and chemical tactics to manage weeds without synthetic herbicides. Organic standards require rotation of annual crops, meaning that a single crop cannot be grown in the same location without a different, intervening crop. Organic crop rotations frequently include weed-suppressive cover crops and crops with dissimilar life cycles to discourage weeds associated with a particular crop. Research is ongoing to develop organic methods to promote the growth of natural microorganisms that suppress the growth or germination of common weeds. Other cultural practices used to enhance crop competitiveness and reduce weed pressure include selection of competitive crop varieties, high-density planting, tight row spacing, and late planting into warm soil to encourage rapid crop germination.

Mechanical and physical weed control practices used on organic farms can be broadly grouped as:

- Tillage - Turning the soil between crops to incorporate crop residues and soil amendments; remove existing weed growth and prepare a seedbed for planting; turning soil after seeding to kill weeds, including cultivation of row crops;
- Mowing and cutting - Removing top growth of weeds;
- Flame weeding and thermal weeding - Using heat to kill weeds; and
- Mulching - Blocking weed emergence with organic materials, plastic films, or landscape fabric.

Some critics, citing work published in 1997 by David Pimentel of Cornell University, which described an epidemic of soil erosion worldwide, have raised concerns that tillage contribute to the erosion epidemic. The FAO and other organizations have advocated a 'no-till' approach to both conventional and organic farming, and point out in particular that crop rotation techniques used in organic farming are excellent no-till approaches. A study published in 2005 by Pimentel and colleagues confirmed that 'Crop rotations and cover cropping (green manure) typical of organic agriculture reduce soil erosion, pest problems, and pesticide use.' Some naturally sourced chemicals are allowed for herbicidal use. These include certain formulations of acetic acid (concentrated vinegar), corn gluten meal, and essential oils. A few selective bio-herbicides based on fungal pathogens have also been developed. At this time, however, organic herbicides and bio-herbicides play a minor role in the organic weed control toolbox. Weeds can be controlled by grazing. For example, geese have been used successfully to weed a range of organic crops including cotton, strawberries, tobacco, and corn, reviving the practice of keeping cotton patch geese, common in the southern U.S. before the 1950s. Similarly, some rice farmers introduce ducks and fish to wet paddy fields to eat both weeds and insects.

Livestock:

For livestock like these healthy cows vaccines play an important part in animal health since antibiotic therapy is prohibited in organic farming. Raising livestock and poultry, for meat, dairy and eggs, is another traditional farming activity that complements growing. Organic farms attempt to provide animals with natural living conditions and feed. Organic certification verifies that livestock are raised according to the USDA organic regulations throughout their lives. These regulations include the requirement that all animal feed must be certified organic. Organic livestock may be, and must be, treated with medicine when they are sick, but drugs cannot be used to promote growth, their feed must be organic, and they must be pastured.

Also, horses and cattle were once a basic farm feature that provided labor, for hauling and plowing, fertility, through recycling of manure, and fuel, in the form of food for farmers and other animals. While today, small growing operations often do not include livestock, domesticated animals are a desirable part of the organic farming equation, especially for true sustainability, the ability of a farm to function as a self-renewing unit.

Composting:

Using manure as a fertilizer risks contaminating food with animal gut bacteria, including pathogenic strains of E. coli that have caused fatal poisoning from eating organic food. To combat this risk, USDA organic standards require that manure must be sterilized through high temperature thermophilic composting. If raw animal manure is used, 120 days must pass before the crop is harvested if the final product comes into direct contact with the soil. For products that don't directly contact soil, 90 days must pass prior to harvest.

Profitability:

The decreased cost of synthetic fertilizer and pesticide inputs, along with the higher prices that consumers pay for organic produce, contribute to increased profits. Organic farms have been consistently found to be as or more profitable than conventional farms. Without the price premium, profitability is mixed. Organic production was more profitable in Wisconsin, given price premiums. For markets and supermarkets organic food is profitable as well, and is generally sold at significantly higher rates than non-organic food.