



Filtrex Item #8302

Using the Filtrex[®] Agricultural System™ in Certified Organic Fruit and Vegetable Production

What Does It Mean To Be Organic? There is probably no more confusing topic in Agriculture today than just what exactly is meant by the term “Organic”. Filtrex[®] Agricultural System™ meets the requirements for “USDA Organic”, commercial fruit and vegetable production. When home gardeners use the term “organic”, it is usually meant that they grow without the use of synthetic fertilizers and chemical pest control agents. In a broad sense, that is also the BASIC meaning of “organic” with regard to commercial crop production, but there is much more that must be considered as well.

The following series of questions and answers will guide you through what is meant by “organic” in commercial fruit and vegetable production.

- Question:** When I see something at a grocery store labeled “USDA Organic” what does that mean?

Answer: In the US, products sold as “organic” are certified as having been grown, harvested and processed in accordance with USDA National Organic Program (NOP) regulations. The NOP regulations went into effect nationwide in 2002. Products that meet the requirements of the regulations may carry the “USDA Certified Organic” label.
- Question:** So exactly how are these products “certified”?

Answer: Products are eligible for certification when the farm on which they are produced has been inspected and approved by an independent third-party certifier accredited by the NOP. Currently, any farm that sells more than \$5000 worth of organic products per year is required to be inspected. Farms must be inspected annually to maintain their certified status.
- Question:** I’ve heard that there is a lot of paperwork and cost involved to get certified.

Answer: Each third-party certifier has its own process to complete the certification inspection. Usually, a farmer that wants to be certified starts by requesting an application package from the certifier of his or her choice. All certifiers charge for certification inspections, which is the primary “non-input” cost involved in becoming certified. Currently, this cost averages about \$600 per year.
- Question:** What do you mean by “certifier of his or her choice”?

Answer: As previously explained, certifiers are independent, third party entities accredited by USDA-NOP to do farm inspections. There are about a hundred of these organizations operating nationally. It is the farmer’s choice as to which certifying organization they wish to utilize. If you are unsure of which certifier is the best choice for your farm, we can help you make a selection.
- Question:** Aren’t there a lot of requirements and records that have to be kept?

Answer: Yes, there are record keeping requirements. You need to be able to demonstrate that the cultural methods and inputs used to produce a crop meet the requirements of the NOP regulations. This means things such as keeping product labels and specification sheets, being able to demonstrate that prohibited substances or practices are NOT used, and that you are using agricultural practices consistent with the regulations. A significant part of the certification inspection is an audit of your records, so it is important to keep them in order.



6. *Question:* I've heard that the Filtrex[®] Agricultural System[™] makes it possible for me to become certified "instantly". How does that work?

Answer: When crops are grown in soil, a farm must go through a three year "transition" period to be sure that residues of prohibited chemicals (fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, etc.) are no longer present in the soil. The Filtrex[®] Agricultural System[™] is different because it uses an approved, compost-based, soilless growing media contained within a modular container system. This system, when used in such a manner that there is no plant contact with soil (such as growing within a high tunnel, on weed barrier, plastic, or landscape cloth), are exempt from the three year requirement because there is no soil contact in the production system.

7. *Question:* So do I have to use landscape cloth if I'm growing in an open field situation?

Answer: Generally we recommend it, and most certifiers will expect it. In essence, the landscape cloth or plastic is your 'hard surface' that isolates the Soxx[™] from the soil (you could achieve the same thing by growing on a concrete slab at considerably more expense). A secondary, although vitally important function of the barrier is to control weeds that otherwise might emerge from the soil and invade your Soxx.

8. *Question:* So where can I find out what's expected of me if I want to become "USDA Organic"?

Answer: Many of the certifying organizations publish guides that will help you do the groundwork necessary to 'transition' your farm from conventional to organic production. Internet links to several of these are at the end of this Tech Link. We also offer a fee-based consulting service that will "walk" you through the certification process using the Filtrex[®] Agricultural System[™].

9. *Question:* Is it worth it?

Answer: While we obviously can't guarantee that you will make more money with "USDA Organic" production, it is the fastest growing segment of the fruit and vegetable market, and good growers generally have no problem selling their crops at a price that can be anywhere from 25-75% higher than an equivalent conventionally grown crop. The Filtrex[®] Agricultural System[™] eliminates a lot of the issues that have made certification a headache in the past, so it's now easier than ever to get into this growing market!



Useful internet links to information about how to become a "USDA Organic" producer:

(These links provide a lot of useful information regarding the organic certification process, however, keep in mind that ALL of them were written long before the Filtrex[®] Agricultural System[™] was in common use. If you have any questions specific to the Filtrex system, please contact us directly.)

<http://www.mosesorganic.org/guidebook.pdf>

<http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/organcert.pdf>

<http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/organiccrop.pdf>

<http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/cropworkbook.pdf>

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AGRICULTURAL SYSTEMS