Starting from scratch on non-organic land checklist

- Allow your non-organic land to convert over a 2-year period adhering to the Soil Association standards
- Source organic perennials and trees where possible - this will reduce conversion time
- Consider tree planting requirements – soil type, depth, sunlight, water, frost pockets or standing water
- Allow generous spacing between trees for canopy growth, roots and air flow. Consider integrating other soft fruit and herb enterprises into your orchard
- Select robust organic varieties, many of which can be sourced from UK organic nurseries
- Consider changing soil fertility requirements through the use of green manures and additional mulches

"An integrated crop management approach which relies on crop monitoring and cultural management techniques can reduce reliance of artificial inputs, improve soil health and boost on-farm biodiversity"
Carolyn Coxe

Contacts

Advice and support from our Farming and Land Use team

Speak to a farming advisor: 0117 314 5100
General enquiries: 0300 330 0100
Email: producer.support@soilassociation.org

Resources

Download a pdf of this and other guides at www.soilassociation.org/guides-for-whole-farm-planning/

For other practical resources and events, see www.soilassociation.org/farmers-growers

POSITIVE OUTCOME AREAS

- [x] SOIL
- [x] CARBON
- [x] WATER
- [x] BIODIVERSITY
- [ ] ANIMAL HEALTH & WELFARE
- [x] SOCIAL

TECHNICAL GUIDE

Orchard conversion guide

What is orchard conversion

This guide is designed to walk you through the key steps required in converting an existing orchard to Organic status. We will look at the time periods required, implications on variety choice, the changing requirements in managing soil fertility, pests and diseases. We will explore both the benefits and the challenges of undertaking conversion highlighting financial opportunities.

Why we need organic orchards in the UK

- UK has lost over half of its orchards since 1900 with farmers under constant financial strain, according to a National Trust report.
- We are only 40% self-sufficient in apples and 20% self-sufficient in pears and plums, despite favourable growing conditions (Forum for the Future).
- We are seeing a decrease in variety diversity – durability, ease of transport and yield are valued over genetic diversity.
- Climate change means more frequent and extreme weather patterns, along with potential new pathogens which require robust, sustainable whole farm management solutions.
- Processed fruit products tend to be reliant on imported fruit.
- Only 33% of adult UK consumers are eating their 5-a-day, according to Soil Association's Home Grown report, with National Food Strategy recommendations to increase consumption 30% by 2032

Orchard conversion timescales

UK and GB legislation require a conversion period of two years, during which time the land is managed according to organic standards. Established orchards can be harvested and sold as organic one year after conversion is completed. This means 3 years in total and conversion can begin once an application has been approved and completed by a certification body. The orchard alone could be converted or the whole farm in stages. When parcels of land are being entered into conversion they need to be risk assessed with attention to detail given to field boundaries and other high risk areas. After 12 months fruit can be harvested with 'in-conversion' status.

Organic top fruit trees or organic perennials planted during the 2-year conversion period do not require the extra year's wait after the land has converted for the fruit to be harvested as organic.

Note: Any non-organic top fruit tree or non-organic perennial must undergo a three-year conversion from its planting date regardless of the conversion status of the land.

"Our changing climate may offer opportunities for new crops like peaches, figs or kiwi fruit"
Ben Raskin

The benefits of organic orchards

- Implementing Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies, shifting the focus to a whole farm system approach, encourages thriving populations of pollinators and beneficial insects.
- You are developing practices that increase biodiversity, introducing winter bird cover, flower margins, beetle banks and wild buffer strips.
- Diversity of varieties creates resilience to fluctuating weather patterns, pest and diseases.
- Helping to conserve a wide and diverse range of British top fruit varieties including heritage.
- By reducing input cost, you are increasing resilience to external market pressures such as input pricing.
- Improving soil health by adding woodchip mulch, growing green manures between rows and incorporating deep-rooted grasses and herbal leys before establishing an orchard.

Orchards variety choices

Variety choice is a crucial decision. Some top fruit varieties show good natural disease resistance. Consider Ashmeads Kernel, Discovery, Adams Pearmain or Sunset (apples) Blue Tit (plum), Concorde (pear).

Canker and scab thrive in wet conditions and can be managed with careful pruning, good tool hygiene, timeliness of pruning with rising of sap, removing infected wood and raking away leaves in the autumn.

Good juicing varieties include Adams Pearmain, Ashmeads Kernel, Ribston Pippin, Lord Lambourne, Bramley and Egremont Russet.

Regional considerations: preserving traditional varieties is important in maintaining regional distinctness and varieties that thrive in your locality.

Join your regional orchard hub for local variety suggestions and build relationships with organic tree nurseries who may have participated in research projects in your region, such as the Dorset Apple Tree Analysis Project.

Recommendations from Tom Nancarrow
www.adamsappletrees.co.uk

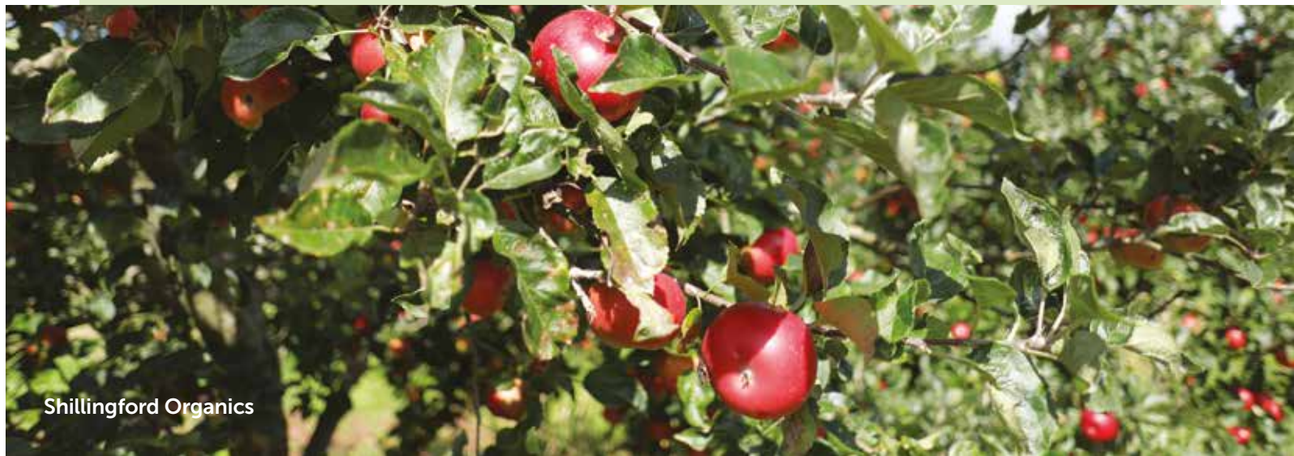
Price comparison across three major retailers

6-pack apples	Retailer	Provenance	Price Organic*	Price Non-Organic*
Pink Lady	Sainsburys	Non-British	£3.75	£2.90
Gala	Waitrose	British where poss	£2.35	£1.80
Braeburn	Ocado	Non-UK	£2.85	£1.75

*Prices checked on retailer websites Aug 2025

Pros and cons of converting an existing orchard

Intervention	Pros	Cons
Starting again – choosing and planting new rootstock.	Reinvigorate your orchard with new organic rootstock choices. Rotate soil to improve soil health and mitigate against soil-borne pest and disease build up.	Labour and time intensive taking out old trees. Major soil disruption and breakdown of existing soil network. Length of time to cropping.
Topping and grafting – cutting the tree right back and grafting on a new variety.	No soil disturbance, a much quicker way of changing variety than replanting. Sometimes with a crop in two years.	Time intensive, skilled labour (grafting), reliant on healthy, robust trees.
Thinning trees – taking whole trees out of existing rows transitioning away from intensive models.	Tree health improvement – increased air flow and light. IPM opportunity – eg introducing areas of wildflowers or perennials to increase biodiversity.	Potentially lower yield per ha. Labour and time intensive
Intra row (planting different varieties within rows).	Intra row variation offers greater diversity mitigating disease and pest risk.	Increased labour burden with skilled management of complicated tree plans. Reduced operational efficiencies during harvest.
Inter row (planting rows of the same variety but varying and alternating between rows).	Inter row variation offers easier management eg. the ability to harvest or treat entire rows at the same time using the same machinery.	Still requires detailed management with some operational inefficiencies. When compared to intra row: increased pest and disease risk and loss of genetic diversity.


Shillingford Organics