



Conversion guide - land and crops

UK and GB legislation specifies a 'conversion period' whereby you must manage your land (and any animals) according to the organic standards for the required period of time, before you can market land or products as organic. The conversion period for land is normally two years. Conversion can start once we receive a completed application form. You can convert your farm in stages, or you can convert the whole farm.

Crop conversion (Standard 2.1)

The conversion rules are different for annual and perennial crops. To sell annual crops (such as cereals or vegetables) as organic you must sow seed or transplants into land that has completed the full conversion period. Established perennial crops like orchards or asparagus can be harvested one year after the conversion is complete.

Arable farmers should aim to start conversion two years before the intended sowing date to ensure an organic crop can be harvested as soon as possible after completing conversion. Similarly, growers should start conversion early in the year before sowing main crops or before harvest time for perennials.

Crops harvested during the second year of conversion can be sold as 'in conversion', once approved by your Certification Officer.

Seed (Standards 2.6 & 2.7)

All organic farmers and growers must source organic seed, wherever available. Organic seed availability is improving year on year and all current seed and suppliers are listed on the UK database of organic seeds, www.organicxseeds.co.uk, which is administered by the Soil Association.

As well as growing varieties that meet your market needs, it is important to choose species and varieties that are most suited to your environmental conditions and resistant to pest and disease threats to your crops.

If you can't source suitable organic varieties, you must provide sufficient justification before you purchase any untreated non-organic seed.

Growers must also source bought-in transplants from an organically certified plant raiser





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Managing soil health and fertility (Standards 2.4 & 2.5)

Organic farming and growing focuses on maintaining a healthy and fertile soil to provide plant nutrition and health, primarily through the soil ecosystem. For an organic system to function, cropping plans and cultivations need to maintain and increase soil organic matter, soil stability, biodiversity and prevent soil compaction and erosion.

Rotation

When it comes to growing crops, a good rotation helps to balance demands on the soil while meeting the nutritional requirements of a sequence of crops.

A sustainable crop rotation will keep nutrient loss to a minimum and help build soil fertility, while limiting the spread and persistence of pests, diseases and weeds. Care must be taken so that cultivations needed for one crop do not damage soil structure for future crops.

Fertility building

Nutrient availability depends on many factors, including soil pH, soil structure, root depths and geology. Where possible within a rotation, legumes should be used, and approved forms of plant and animal wastes recycled to reduce the need to buy in nutrients. Additional crop needs should be identified through analysis and nutrient budgeting.

Practices like the use of green manure crops or plant companions also represent approaches to maintain and increase soil fertility.

Approved inputs

Some natural organic fertilisers and supplementary nutrients can be permitted as a last resort, but proof is needed that there is a deficiency present. Artificial nitrogen fertilisers is prohibited.

If you buy in supplementary nutrients it is important to ensure they are allowed and contain only ingredients that are permitted for organic growing. (These are listed in sections 2.4 and 2.5 of Soil Association standards). Some fertilisers, composts and substrates are sold as 'organic' but aren't suitable for use in organic production, so it's important to check.

Your Certification Officer can check the suitability of any products you intend to use and provide lists of approved composts and other growing materials.

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Controlling weeds, pests and diseases (Standards 2.6)

As organic standards prohibit herbicides, weed control requires significant management and consideration.

Variety choice and careful timing of cultural and mechanical methods is essential to limit weed competition with your crops. This may include pre-emergence and postemergence mechanical operations. The use of mulches, false seedbeds, hoes and thermal weeding as well as hand weeding is common place on horticulture units.

Like weeds, cultural controls and prevention are key to organic crop protection. A healthy fertile soil will ensure strong, healthy crops; while a combination of resistant varieties, strategic sowing times, crop rotations, frequent monitoring, physical barriers and the encouragement of natural predators for pests all help to prevent significant crop damage. But even with these measures in place you may still need to use additional pest control products. Organic growers can use a limited number of pest control products, listed in section 2.6 of the Soil Association standards.

Your Certification Officer can direct you to crop specific guidance and further sources of advice and information.

Crop management plan

A crop management plan must be completed and we provide a template for this.

Your Certification Officer can direct you to guidance and information.

