



# Organic Myth Busters



## Background:

Organic agriculture is an ecologically based system of growing and harvesting crops and raising livestock using cultural, biological, and mechanical practices to conserve natural resources and biodiversity, foster ecological balance, and adapt to site-specific conditions.

NRCS staff may be asked to assist certified organic producers, producers transitioning to organic, and producers following organic principles with the planning and implementation of conservation practices and financial assistance through Farm Bill Programs.

This fact sheet does not replace policy. It is intended to help planners and customers to better understand organic systems and offer clarity on common myths of organic production. We're here to bust some of these myths!



### MYTHS

**MYTH 1:** Organic is a marketing gimmick.

### FACTS

**THE TRUTH:** Products displaying the USDA Organic seal go through a rigorous annual certification process, based on national standards reviewed biannually with input from organic producers, business owners, researchers, consumers, and others. These standards go well beyond substituting synthetic inputs with natural ones—the regulation also includes many required conservation practices that support soil health, crop rotation, biodiversity, improving soil organic

matter content, and more. Many of the arguments that organic is simply a marketing gimmick are rooted in consumer perceptions of the organic label that may not be true.



### MYTHS

**MYTH 2:** Organic farms don't use pesticides.

### FACTS

**THE TRUTH:** The USDA organic regulations allow for the use of biological or botanical substances, or conventional substances approved for organic production to control pests. However, producers must first use prevention and avoidance strategies and mechanical or physical control methods to prevent pest issues, and can only use the substances allowed in organic production when these methods have proven insufficient for control. Generally, the organic regulations allow for the use of natural materials derived from plant and animal sources such as neem, and prohibit synthetic materials such as glyphosate. However, there are exceptions to this rule. Decisions on what materials are and are not allowed are decided by the National Organic Standards Board with input from producers, business owners, researchers, consumers, and others.





## ORGANIC MYTH BUSTERS



### ✗ MYTHS

**MYTH 3: Organic is small-scale, or urban.**

### ✓ FACTS

**THE TRUTH:** While small-scale, urban organic operations may receive consumer visibility through farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture, and agrotourism, organic is not inherently small-scale or urban. Many small-scale and/or urban farmers may have an interest in employing some or all aspects of organic production (and may or may not be certified organic). However, the USDA organic regulations apply to all certified organic operations equally, regardless of scale or location. Those hundreds of acres of sprawling grain fields you drive by in rural Iowa? Those might just be organic, too!



### ✗ MYTHS

**MYTH 4: Organic is low-tech.**

### ✓ FACTS

**THE TRUTH:** Many organic producers are interested in, or are already using high-tech solutions to reduce weed pressure, maintain soil health, reduce labor requirements, and more. In fact, many new technologies are being developed specifically with organic producers in mind—for example, AI-powered machines that use electricity, lasers, or blades to terminate weeds while preserving soil structure and reducing the need for tillage.



### ✗ MYTHS

**MYTH 5: Organic has low yields.**

### ✓ FACTS

**THE TRUTH:** Whether or not organic production has lower yields than conventional is a widely discussed and debated topic, with multiple studies concluding each side of the issue. Longer-term studies have shown that after an initial decline in yields associated with the transition to organic, yields in organic systems can be comparable to conventional systems. There is wide variance in farming techniques and external factors that can influence yields under both management strategies. Additionally, the USDA organic regulations are relatively new—the national implementation of these standards was in 2002. Ultimately, more research is needed in this area. As new research is developed, we continue to learn more.



### ✗ MYTHS

**MYTH 6: Organic farmers use excessive tillage.**

### ✓ FACTS

**THE TRUTH:** While many organic farmers use some form of soil disturbance, many are interested in reducing or eliminating tillage. Just as there is wide variance in the amount of tillage conventional producers use, the same variance exists amongst organic producers. Tools such as roller crimpers, flail mowers, and the high-tech solutions mentioned in Myth #4 (electric and laser-weeders, or others that utilize steam or flame) can all support organic farmers' goals in reducing tillage.



## Learn more about NRCS programs and services for organic producers:

### NRCS Organic Agriculture:

[www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic)

### NRCS Technical and Financial Assistance for Organic Producers:

[www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic/technical-and-financial-assistance-for-organic-producers](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic/technical-and-financial-assistance-for-organic-producers)

### NRCS Organic Training and Webinars:

[www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic/nrcs-organic-agriculture-webinars](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic/nrcs-organic-agriculture-webinars)

### NRCS Organic Factsheets and Handouts:

[www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic/organic-booklet-and-factsheets](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/other-topics/organic/organic-booklet-and-factsheets)

