



FIELD NOTES

on Growing Organic

A peer-to-peer guide for prospective Certified Organic growers in the Carolinas and the Southeast.

What established organic farmers wish someone had told them before they certified.

CAROLINA FARM STEWARDSHIP ASSOCIATION - 2026

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PART 1 • INTRODUCTION

Dispelling Organic Misconceptions

If you're thinking about going organic, you've probably already heard the doubts — maybe in your own head. *“It’s too expensive. The paperwork will bury me. Three years is too long to wait. I’m functionally organic already.”* Those worries are real, and this guide takes them seriously. But every one of them looks different once you’ve talked to someone who has already stood where you’re standing.

This guide is designed to provide factual knowledge that established growers in the region say they wish they’d had on day one.

The market is worth the trouble. The Southeast has historically been a small player in organic, but that has been changing fast: USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) reports that organic sales rose sharply across the South over the last decade as demand outpaced supply. ERS also names the three real hurdles to transition: the concern over administrative paperwork, price and yield risk during the wait, and access to organic markets. These concerns and more will be covered in this resource.

How to read this guide. Each page tackles one source of hesitation: what certification really means, what it costs, how to farm organically in our heat and humidity, how to actually get paid, where to find help, and what to do first.

“I believe in organic production, not only for the health of our greater environment, but for the health of the family farm both financially and literally...The more small and mid-sized family farms that move into certified organic production, the more integrity there will be in the label.”

— Ben Dubard, Wild Hope Farm - Chester, S.C.

PART 2 · THE BASICS

What “Certified Organic” Means and What It Doesn’t

Certified Organic is a federal standard, the USDA National Organic Program (NOP), enforced by accredited certifiers. At its core is one rule that trips up most newcomers: before a crop can be sold as certified organic, the land it grows on must be managed without prohibited input for **36 months**. That’s the transition period, and the clock starts from the date of the last prohibited application, not the day you apply. Growers who learn this early often realize their land is further along than they feared.

Organic is not “spray nothing and hope for the best.” The backbone is your Organic System Plan (OSP), a living document describing how you build soil, manage pests and weeds, source seed, and prevent contamination. It serves as the record you keep and update as you farm. Certification also comes in scopes (crops, wild crops, livestock, and handling), and you certify only the ones you need.

Transitional is not the same as certified. During the 36 months you may hear your land called “transitional.” Some buyers will pay a modest premium for transitional products, but you cannot use the word “organic” or the USDA Certified Organic seal until certification is complete.

WHAT WE WISH WE KNEW: *Start your recordkeeping and your OSP-minded thinking on day one of transition, not in year three. The farmers who struggle most are the ones trying to reconstruct three years of activity from memory.*

“We’d heard over and over that the paperwork was going to be substantial and prohibitive, but once you get your system down, the requirements are surprisingly helpful to not only document certification, but to keep track of what works on the farm and what doesn’t.”

– Jane Saiers, RambleRill Farm - Hillsborough, N.C.

PART 3 · BE YOUR OWN ADVOCATE

Be Prepared to Advocate for Yourself

Once a year, an inspector will walk your farm. It's a required part of staying certified, and producers say it can often feel intimidating (or at least tedious). Inspectors will often spend hours at an operation, going through files, documents, supplies and more to ensure compliance. Most producers who have been through an organic inspection will have stories to tell, and below are some lessons they have shared.

Expect some strange questions. Inspectors follow audit trails: they'll pick a sale and trace it backward to the field it came from, or follow an input forward through your paperwork. You may be asked to prove a seed was untreated, produce a compost recipe, explain exactly how you keep a neighbor's products from drifting onto your organic sections or more. It can often feel like they're *expecting* you to cut corners.

Documentation is your friend. Documentation is a key component of not just your Organic Systems Plan, but should also be a cornerstone of every audit. Have readily-accessible copies of any and all communications with your certifier and/or your pre-audit consultants.

Speak up for your system. Nobody understands your farm the way you do. If an inspector seems to misunderstand how your operation works, have the confidence to explain it calmly and plainly. If you disagree with something in their findings, there is a formal appeals process if it comes to that.

WHAT WE WISH WE KNEW: *Just because you have a thorough paper trail doesn't mean you won't be posed challenging or confusing questions during the inspection process. Communicate with your inspector or consultant in advance, and be confident in your work and processes.*

"The Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) database can be extremely frustrating; I often find myself digging to determine whether specific blends of feed will be approved. I've also found myself having to explain seemingly-obvious practices to inspectors, and it comes down to trusting my experience and prep work."

– Rebecca Bills, R & R Acres - Jamestown, S.C.

PART 4 • THE MONEY QUESTION

The Cost of Certifying, Answered Honestly

Two very different costs get tangled together when people talk about “the cost of organic,” and separating them removes most of the fear.

First, the certification fees. These are smaller than most expect. For a small operation, direct certification costs and related fees commonly run in the range of roughly \$750 to \$1,500 a year before any cost-share. And there is real help: the federal Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) reimburses up to 75 percent of those costs, capped at \$750 per certification scope. Recent legislation secured OCCSP funding at \$8 million a year through 2031, so the program is stable for the foreseeable future. One practical caveat: that national pool doesn’t cover every request, and funds are first-come, first-served, so apply early in the cycle.

Second, the transition gap. This is the cost people don’t see coming. During the three-year transition you are already farming to organic standards, often at higher cost, but you cannot yet sell at the organic price premium. That squeeze is real, and it’s the single biggest financial reason growers hesitate. The answer isn’t to ignore it; it’s to budget for it as a known business expense and to stack the programs that help bridge it.

Money to bridge the gap. Look at NRCS’s EQIP National Organic Initiative and the broader USDA Organic Transition Initiative for cost-share on conservation practices during transition; FSA microloans for operating capital; and crop insurance options tailored to organic and transitioning producers. Higher payment rates are available for beginning, veteran, socially disadvantaged, and limited-resource farmers.

WHAT WE WISH WE KNEW: *Treat the transition years as a line item, not a surprise, and stack every program you qualify for. The fees are the straightforward part; having a plan for the transition period will make the three years a little more predictable.*

PART 5 • CLIMATE CONSIDERATIONS

Growing Organic in a Hot, Humid Place

Here's where national organic advice often falls apart: most of it wasn't written for the Southeast. Our humid, subtropical climate means year-round weed pressure, fast-multiplying insect populations, and disease that thrives on humidity. Generic guidance underestimates all three. In fact, organic growers nationwide rank weed management as their number-one research priority.

Soil is the part people underestimate. Our heat and humidity speed the breakdown of soil organic matter, so you're constantly working to build and conserve it rather than just maintain it. A target of around 3 percent organic matter is a reasonable goal for many Southeastern soils. Cover crops, compost, and careful rotation aren't optional extras here; they're the engine of the whole system.

What actually works regionally. Growers in the Carolinas lean on a few field-tested tactics: rotating brassicas (collards, kale, broccoli) with vigorous summer cover crops like sorghum-sudangrass to break pest cycles; scouting fields about twice a week during the hottest, most humid stretches when problems explode fastest; and choosing mesh row covers over plastic in summer so crops can breathe in the heat. The theme across all of it is timing and prevention over rescue.

WHAT WE WISH WE KNEW: *Your timing and your cover-crop plan will protect your crop more than any approved input you can buy. In this climate, the calendar is your most important tool.*

"People said we'd be nuts to grow organic apples in this climate. Pest rot results in apples that are still serviceable, but wet rot is truly challenging. Adapting to the climate takes ingenuity and labor – like bagging the fruit or thinning – but is effective and makes it 100% worth it."

– Dorsey & Brittany Kordick, Kordick Family Farm - Westfield, N.C.

PART 6 · ORGANIC PREMIUMS

Markets and Premiums

The fear underneath most hesitation is simple: will this actually be worth it? The honest answer is that the premium is real, but it doesn't apply automatically, and the most common mistake is treating organic as a swap of inputs.

Where Southeast growers sell. You have more channels than you might think: direct markets (farmers markets, CSA, farm stands), wholesale to grocers and restaurants, and increasingly to food hubs that pool small farms to reach larger buyers.

Why input-substitution alone fails. Research on organic profitability is blunt about this: growers who simply substitute an organic-approved input for a conventional one, while changing nothing else, tend to struggle. Profit comes from designing a resilient system and from pricing your product above its true cost of production, incorporating the labor and management that growers routinely undervalue. Organic rewards the whole-system thinker.

Diversify, then anchor. Spreading risk across several crops and stacked enterprises is the regional norm for good reason: it cushions you against weather and price swings. But diversification works best when it's matched to buyers you've actually lined up, rather than chasing a premium in the abstract.

WHAT WE WISH WE KNEW: *Your timing and your cover-crop plan will protect your crop more than any approved input you can buy. In this climate, the calendar is your most important tool.*

"Our organic market is centered almost exclusively on direct-to-consumer markets, mainly farmers markets. After the work to get certified, our organic logo is front and center on our booth because consumers really want to see it and know what they're buying."

– Rebecca Bills, R & R Acres - Jamestown, S.C.

PART 7 · YOUR FIRST STEPS

If We Were Starting Today

Knowing where to begin dissolves a lot of hesitation. If you were starting your transition this season, here's how our farmers would attack the project:

1. Start your transition recordkeeping now: dates, inputs, field maps.
2. Contact a USDA-accredited certifier and request a fee schedule, so you know your real numbers.
3. Draft your Organic System Plan, which serves as your operating playbook.
4. Apply early for OCCSP cost-share, and explore EQIP / Organic Transition Initiative support.
5. Find a local or regional organic mentor; existing organic producers are often eager to provide insight and experience.

Quick-Reference Resources:

- **Certifier locator & OCCSP:** USDA AMS organic site and your local FSA office (fsa.usda.gov)
- **Conservation help:** NRCS — EQIP National Organic Initiative (nrcs.usda.gov)
- **Carolinas support & market access:** Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (carolinafarmstewards.org)
- **Practical production guides:** ATTRA/NCAT and your state Cooperative Extension

"It is possible to grow Certified Organic, you hear about how impossible it is and how onerous the paperwork requirements are. If I knew how feasible it really was, I would have pursued it a long time ago."

– Dorsey & Brittany Kordick, Kordick Family Farm - Westfield, N.C.