



BDA Certification



Converting your farm – top fruit, soft fruit and viticulture

Converting your farm to organic is a bold and courageous move. Here are some key aspects to consider for top and soft fruit crops and viticulture.

How do I become organic?

First of all, your holding must go through a conversion period in order for the land and crops to achieve organic status. During the conversion, you must manage the holding according to the organic standards. You can convert the whole holding in one step, convert the whole holding in stages, or convert only part of the holding. You cannot usually grow the exact same crop on organic land and on non-organic land at the same time because of the risk of mixing up the two harvests, but where the holding is in a staged conversion it may be possible to do this on a temporary basis if good separation systems are in place.

How long does it take until I can sell my produce as organic?

Most land conversions take two years, but perennial crops take three years to convert.

- All crops harvested after the first year can be sold or labelled as 'in conversion'
- Annual crops sown after the two year conversion have full organic status
- Perennial crops, including soft fruit, top fruit, and vines need a third year of conversion; perennial crops harvested after the third year have full organic status

Where there is evidence that no prohibited inputs have been used on the land prior to the start of conversion, it may be possible to reduce the overall conversion time by 4 months, or, with approval from Defra, by up to 12 months.

In order to have an organic crop as soon as possible, it makes sense to start your conversion in the summer, shortly before your main harvest season. If you are working with a newly planted orchard or vineyard, it makes sense to start the conversion three years before you are expecting your first proper harvest, if possible, so that you have an organic crop from the beginning.

Do I have to use organic plants?

Under the organic standards you must use organic plants when you are establishing or replanting orchards, vineyards and soft fruit. However, in the UK there is currently a very limited supply of organic vines, trees and soft fruit plants available on the market. Therefore, the UK certification bodies have agreed that it is possible for organic growers to request permission to buy in non-organic plants if suitable organic plants are not available. These plants must then go through a **three-year conversion period** before the crop can be sold or labelled as organic. The crop can be sold as 'in-conversion' after one year.

The rules for 'propagating material' are different, so it's worth understanding what counts as a transplant, and what counts as propagating material. Propagating material includes rootstock and scions (before grafting), strawberry runners (before potting up), rhubarb crowns, and cuttings and roots for propagating. If

you need to buy in propagating material, you must use organic material where it is available. However, where there is no suitable organic propagating material available, your certification body can give you permission to use untreated, non-organic propagating material. You must ask your certification body for permission, or request a derogation, before buying the non-organic propagating material, but there is no need for the resulting plants to go through a conversion period.

If you need to carry out any reseeded, you must use organic seed. There is fairly good availability of organic seed, but, just like with the propagating material, it is possible to get permission to use untreated non-organic seed if you can't find suitable organic seed.

The official, and very comprehensive database for organic seed availability is here:

www.organicxseeds.co.uk. It includes some top and soft fruit plants, too, but isn't such a good indicator of availability for plants and propagating material.

Should I consider using different varieties?

In the long run you may start making different choices about which varieties you use. Switching to organic production methods is likely to mean that varieties with pest and disease resistance become more important to you. Organic growers also tend to be interested in prioritising varieties for their taste, unusual appearance or heritage value.

How do I manage crop nutrition?

On an organic farm the aim is to operate close to self sufficiency, so that crop nutrition needs are met through cultivating soil health, incorporating nitrogen fixing crops, grazing livestock, and use of composted manures from the holding.

However, this closed loop approach to fertility is not always achievable in practice, especially in standalone orchards and vineyards. It is acceptable, and quite normal, for organic growers to bring in manure, and plant composts. All manures must come from extensive farming.

Synthetic fertilisers are prohibited in organic farming, but where there is evidence of need, for example through soil or tissue testing, it is possible to use a range of soil amendments and foliar feeds, including trace elements, rock phosphate, seaweed, kieserite and other natural or basic substances. There is a full list of permitted fertility inputs in Appendices 1 and 2 of our standards. You do need to check that all products are suitable for use in organic production – even products labelled as organic may not actually meet the requirements of the standards.

Can I continue to use crop protection products?

In an organic system, prevention and control of pests and disease is based on healthy soil and plants, crop rotation, use of resistant varieties, careful monitoring, physical barriers, and encouragement of pest predators.

Nearly all pesticides and fungicides are prohibited under the organic standards, but where there is a need it is possible to use a range of more natural plant protection products such as plant oils, microorganisms, and pheromone traps. As a last resort copper, sulphur, potassium bicarbonate and pyrethrins can be used. Copper is currently only approved for use on vines, and not for use on top fruit. There is a full list of permitted plant protection substances in Appendix 4 of our standards. As with fertility inputs, it's worth checking that crop protection products are suitable for use in organic production (and actually legal to use in the UK), especially if they do not carry an organic product approval stamp from one of the UK organic certification bodies.

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And what about herbicides?

Herbicides cannot be used on organic farms, even as a last resort, so a careful strategy for control of weeds and grass growth is necessary. Organic growers make use of a wide range of mulches, including plastic membranes and woodchip, to suppress weed growth around soft fruit and new plantings. Other common strategies are mowing, topping, and use of grazing livestock; mechanical and hand weeding; and use of carefully designed seed mixes when undersowing or reseeded alleyways.

What are the rules on labelling?

You can only label your produce as organic once you have completed conversion. You will need to submit all retail labels to us for approval before you use them so that we can all be confident they are compliant with the regulations. We have separate guidance with detailed labelling requirements.

Is my juice, cordial and wine covered?

Do bear in mind that if you carry out any packing, labelling or processing on the holding, or if you have any subcontractors doing this for you, these activities will also need to be certified. This could include, for example, juicing, any home made preserves, wine making, and even storage of fruit off site.

Depending on the type or scale of the activity this may be included within your production license, or may require an additional processing license. Small scale juicing on the farm could be covered by an add-on to your farm production license, but wine making and preserves would need a separate processing license.

What is the inspection like? Is there a lot of paperwork?

All organic operators have an annual inspection, and occasionally an additional unannounced inspection. Our inspectors are professional, but friendly and totally human. At the annual inspection the inspector will want to walk your land, see your crops, understand your farming systems, and check your record keeping. The inspection can usually be carried out within half a day, but might be longer for a large or complex operation.

It's important that you keep full records of all your purchases and inputs, production and sales. Much of this record keeping will be in line with wider government requirements or general good practice, but there is likely to be a small increase in paperwork to enable your organic certification. We may also be looking at your records from a different perspective than any other bodies – for example, we need to see that you are using organic seeds, and that your crop protection products are compliant with the organic standards.

If you have any questions about the conversion process, the organic standards, or certification, please do get in touch with our small friendly team and we will do our best to help.

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