

# Why grow organic?

By Ryan Atwood  
and Timothy Spann

**S**ales of organically grown produce in America have grown by 20 percent each of the past 10 years. This trend has not gone unnoticed by big grocers who are trying to offer more organic fruits and vegetables. Demand for organic citrus is following this trend, and organic citrus acreage is increasing. However, demand for organic citrus fresh fruit and juice continues to outpace supply. Currently, organic citrus production is estimated at around 5,000 acres, accounting for less than one percent of citrus acreage in Florida.

Some in the citrus industry may have a negative view of organic production, which can be attributed to those producers who have not kept the true spirit of organic production. True organic horticulture is more than just mowing once a year and throwing some chicken manure on a grove. In order for a farmer to be “certified organic,” he or she must have a farm plan. This plan includes monitoring, scouting, fertilizer, weed control and insect control, just like a conventional farm plan. To understand the evolution of the organic industry, one must look at the history and certification processes and their effects over the past 20 years.

In 1990, the U.S. Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act as part of the Farm Bill. This law required the USDA to develop national standards for organically produced and marketed agricultural products. The National Organic Program (NOP) was fully implemented in 2002, after years of debate and discussion. NOP requires farmers interested in becoming certified organic growers to work with a certifying agency to ensure that producers are following organic standards. There are 55 organic certifying agencies located in the United States and their contact information can be found at the USDA’s NOP Web page, <http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOP/indexIE.htm>.

Certifying agencies require the grower to complete an application,



*A McLean family grove that has been in organic production since 2002.*

which includes a farm plan for organic production. The plan must include the list of materials the grower plans to use in producing his crop. The Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) provides organic certifiers, growers, manufacturers and suppliers an independent review of products intended for use in certified organic production, handling and processing. The OMRI handbook can be bought for \$19 or downloaded for free at <http://www.omri.org/>.

Part of the certifying process consists of an independent inspection of the farm or property intended for organic production. There is an annual report filed based on the results of farm inspections and records are regularly audited.



*High quality fertilizers are expensive but essential to healthy organic production.*

## ADVANTAGES, DISADVANTAGES

There are some advantages and disadvantages when comparing ease of operation between organic and conventional production systems. When first converting from conventional to organic horticultural practices, there is a three-year transitional period on land that has recently had synthetic chemicals or fertilizers applied. During this three-year period, fruit is grown organically, but can only be sold as conventional product. This period is difficult for growers as trees can sometimes decline for a short time due to the implementation of new horticultural practices. Accompanying this decline in tree health is a decline in yield, and without the premium price that comes from certified organic products, this transitional period can be difficult.

Once a grower follows the spirit and law of NOP for a couple of years, he starts seeing positive results. One such result is increased organic matter in the soil, which will hopefully lead to less fertilizer costs in the future. Another observation by growers and DPI inspectors is lower psyllid populations, possibly due to the higher population of beneficial insects found in organic groves.

Weeds can be a big problem for organic growers as there is yet to be an organic herbicide that provides good weed control. The quality of organic herbicides has been improving in recent years, and the hope is that even better products will be available in the future. Heavy weed populations cause problems with microirrigation sprinklers, thus affecting water availability to the tree’s root system. In mature groves with good canopy development, shade will be sufficient to keep



*A good organic farm program will lead to healthy, productive trees.*

weeds down close to the tree, and mechanical control can be implemented throughout the rest of the grove. However, in young organic blocks without full canopy cover, weeds are particularly problematic.

One misconception is that organic production equals “cheap” production — that is, little to no inputs. However, a quality organic program will cost

equal to or slightly more than the state average for conventional management, primarily because of the high costs of good organic N-P-K fertilizers.

Another misconception is that organic production is not as profitable as conventional production due to lower yields. However, once a block achieves full certification, the higher production costs are more than offset

by the higher price the product demands in the market. In fact, one advantage organic producers have over conventional producers is a stable price for their product. When conventional fruit prices are high — as they were this past season — conventional growers may make slightly more than their organic counterparts. However, over the past three-, five- and 10-year periods, average returns for organic groves have been greater than for conventional groves, making them more profitable.

If you are interested in organic production, the best way to learn about organic horticulture is to attend trade shows, review the OMRI book, spend time visiting with other organic growers, or partner with someone who is already in the business. Another great source for those interested in learning more about organic production is the Organic Trade Association’s Web page <http://www.howtogoorganic.com/>.

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