

GET THE FACTS

ABOUT ORGANICS IN ALBERTA



LET'S TALK ABOUT GROWING ORGANICALLY VS. CERTIFIED ORGANIC GROWERS

Canadian farmers are always striving for more regenerative farming practices. Whether they're raising livestock or growing crops, they keep their eyes on the future. The overall goal is to be sustainable, and in order to achieve this, many farmers use age-old farming practices to improve soil health and stimulate better crop growth. For some, it's simply a choice they make. While for others, it's a regulated process they follow so they can become certified organic producers. So what are the differences when it comes to farmers who choose organic practices but aren't certified, and those who choose to go through the processes required to become a certified organic Canadian producer? We have a few questions that might help differentiate between the two while also busting a few myths!

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF ORGANIC CERTIFICATION: FACT OR FICTION?

Fact or Fiction: There are many farmers in Canada who choose to follow organic regulations, but haven't been certified.

Fact. There is no license for using organic growing practices. In fact, many organic growing methods were historically used in conventional farming and are still used today, even on farms that aren't certified organic. Some farmers choose to ease themselves into organic production, starting with small changes that will eventually lead to the certification process.

Fact or Fiction: Organic certification is too difficult and expensive to be worthwhile.

Fiction. Becoming certified organic has specific costs and

changes associated with it, but many organic farmers in Alberta have found that having access to the organic market has created additional opportunities for them.

Fact or Fiction: Most people don't buy certified organic food and products anyway.

Fiction. Organic produce makes up a large share of the fresh food market in Canada. According to Canada Organic Trade Association's (COTA) report, the Canadian organic food and beverage market grew at an average rate of 8.4% per year between 2012 and 2017. In Alberta, 74% of Albertans reach for certified organics at their local grocery stores or markets each week.

MEET RYAN OF RECLAIM URBAN FARM

Ryan Mason owns Reclaim Urban Farm, a multi-generational farm in Pigeon Lake, Alberta. He has a strong background in agriculture that extends from his early roots on the family farm to a Master's in Environmental Sociology. For a time, Ryan ran Reclaim Urban Farm in the heart of Old Strathcona, farming in "borrowed" garden beds and empty lots near Whyte Avenue. About a year ago, he was given the chance to take over the family farm, and he jumped at the opportunity.

Ryan's farm grows mostly vegetable crops and microgreens (which are grown indoors in a greenhouse), as well as flowers. He spends a lot of time at local markets in Edmonton, and his produce can be found in popular organic shops like Blush Lane, Planet Organic, and Organic Box. Without an organic certification, Ryan would not be able to have his products in organic shops like the ones previously mentioned, so we decided to ask him a few questions about the process.



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HOW DO FARMERS BECOME CERTIFIED ORGANIC?

The certification process can take anywhere from 15 months to several years to complete. By the time they have their first inspection, farmers should be taking steps to begin using organic practices like sourcing organic seeds and discontinuing the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides that are not on the permitted substances list.

It's important to note that some farms may have organic certification for some products, while other products they grow or raise are for sale in the conventional market. For example, a farmer may produce organic vegetables, but also sell non-organic wheat crops. The certification is for a product, not a farm.

The soil has to be free from prohibited substances for three years.

For Ryan, the certification process was fairly straightforward. He said that's mainly because the fields he was farming on had already been free of prohibited substances like synthetic fertilizers for over two years. For others, it could be a longer process with more steps and time involved.

There is a minimum 15-month application period for the transition.

Ryan says this waiting period can happen before the fields have been clear of prohibited substances for the full three years. By this time, farmers should have already switched to using organic methods, and a crop production plan is put in place and the first inspection occurs.

After certification, a farm needs to be inspected and recertified every year.

Farms have to show they're continually committed to upholding the organic standards by passing inspections by a third-party certifying body and becoming recertified on an annual basis.

Certified organic production and conventional production must be separated.

If a farmer wants to produce organically while growing other products conventionally, those products and processes must be completely

separated. For example, Ryan produces both organic and non-organic microgreens in his greenhouse, so each type of production is separated physically and clearly marked.

THE COSTS OF ORGANIC CERTIFICATION FOR CANADIAN FARMERS

Ryan says the cost of inspection and certification is about \$800 per year for his farm. The cost of certification is dependent on the size and type of farm. A livestock farming certification typically costs more than the certification for crop farming. This table from the Organic Council of Ontario shows the different costs for certification.

Aside from the upfront costs, there are a few hidden fees, including time spent on research and tracking seeds or animals, and production costs. For example, Ryan occasionally uses plastic mulch in his raised beds, which keeps water from leaking out. Due to organic regulations, he can only choose one type of biodegradable mulch, leaving him without other, more affordable options open to conventional farmers.

THE BENEFITS OF ORGANIC CERTIFICATION FOR CANADIAN FARMERS

"When we started the farm, we planned to use low-impact, sustainable farming practices anyway," Ryan says. It made sense for his farm to start the certification process right away.

New markets were also a major draw. The ability to have Reclaim Urban Farm products sold by organic retailers like Planet Organic and Organic Box have made a big difference for the farm. The Canada Organic Logo also helps sell more produce at local markets.

It goes much further than a slip of paper or extra selling power, though. For Ryan, one of the greatest benefits of organic certification is the accountability to yourself and your customers. Ryan said having third-party validation stating that he is doing his due diligence, using sustainable methods, and truly examining his farming practices gives him a sense of purpose and vision.

WAYS TO LEARN MORE

Do you want to learn more about what organically-grown means in Alberta? Would you value monthly updates on Alberta's local organic sector - including legislation, farming practices, GMO regulation, and more? Visit organicalberta.org/getthefacts and:

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