

# GET THE FACTS

## ABOUT ORGANICS IN ALBERTA



### HOW AND WHERE DO FARMERS SOURCE ORGANIC SEEDS?

The organic market in Alberta is growing, and not just in farmers' fields. The Canadian Organic Trade Association's (COTA) 2018 Alberta Organic Market Report shows that 96% of organic shoppers put organic fruits and vegetables into their carts, with 80% of them reaching for organic breads and grains. Even when overall spending on organic food decreased, shoppers stayed committed to getting their fruits, veggies, breads and grains from organic sources.

If you're one of the many people who reach for organic food in the grocery store, you might have picked up a tomato or a bunch of carrots and thought, "What's the difference, anyway?"

According to the Canadian Organic Standards, it all starts with a single seed.

#### 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. Ryan has a wealth of knowledge when it comes to organic growing, so we asked him a few questions about how he sources seeds for his farm.

#### WHY DO SEED SOURCES MATTER?

Seeds matter in farming, whether you farm organically or conventionally. According to Ryan, the vast majority of energy and nutrients that come through a plant are determined by the seeds they're grown from. This is especially true for Ryan's microgreens, but it also applies to field crops.

All seeds, conventional or organic, have to follow specific rules. According to the Canadian Seed Institute, "Before Canadian seed can be sold or planted, it goes through a number of important steps. Many of these steps are specified in regulations, policies, and guidelines, and together they make up the lifecycle of a seed in Canada."

So, what are the rules that apply to organic seeds grown or used in Canada?

- 1. They're grown without synthetic chemicals.** Just like organic crops, organic seeds are grown without the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides.
- 2. They are non-GMO.** Organic seeds are not genetically modified



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**3. They're untreated.** Although conventional seeds may be treated, which means they've been sprayed with fungicides, antimicrobials, or insecticides, all seed treatments available for use in Canada are regulated by the Pest Control Products Act. Organic seeds must be untreated.

#### IS THERE A TRACKING PROCESS FOR ORGANIC SEEDS?

Organic crop farmers are required to track the origins of their seeds. They're responsible for research and purchasing, and they need to keep detailed records that show they've done their due diligence when it comes to ordering seeds.

Ryan says it's a time-consuming process, but also eye-opening. It forced him to do a lot more research into how seeds are produced and think more broadly about his entire operation. He has to double-check specifics with the suppliers he buys from and keep very detailed transaction records. His tracking is far more time-consuming because he grows many different kinds of market vegetables, which means tracking hundreds of different kinds of seeds. By contrast, the tracking isn't nearly as cumbersome for an organic farmer with just a few wheat crops.

#### WHERE DO ORGANIC SEEDS COME FROM?

Ryan said he finds his seeds through a few suppliers, including Mumm's, Sprout Master, Johnny's, and William Dam. He says other organic crop farmers he knows tend to use a combination of their own online research and word of mouth to source seeds.

Most of the seeds Ryan buys are sourced directly from Canadian suppliers, but occasionally he reaches across the border and has them shipped in from the US. US seeds labelled as "organic" have been inspected by a third-party organization to ensure they meet the Canadian Organic Standards.

Another affordable option for farmers is collecting seeds from their own organic crops. Ryan does this for some of his crops, including tomato, calendula flower, chrysanthemum, garlic, potatoes, and artichokes.

#### ARE ORGANIC SEEDS MORE EXPENSIVE OR HARDER TO FIND THAN CONVENTIONAL SEEDS?

Ryan told us that organic seeds tend to cost about two to three times the cost of conventional seeds, and depending on the type of crop they may be harder to source. He's found a few suppliers that offer certain types of organic seeds at a lower cost than some conventional alternatives, but that's fairly uncommon.

So, what's the main reason for the cost difference? Lack of demand, Ryan says. As the organic market begins to pick up steam in Canada, organic seed prices may go down as more farmers begin to source them. In 2012, COTA published a market analysis of the Canadian seed market and found that: "These systems are tailored to conventional seed production, and present significant barriers to the development and circulation of varieties that would be well-suited to organic farming systems."

#### WHAT HAPPENS IF ORGANIC SEEDS CAN'T BE FOUND?

When organic farmers want to grow a certain type of plant, but can't find organic seed, they have options. In most cases, a "seed affidavit" will be used. The document shows that an organic farmer looked at a minimum of two sourcing options and could not find suitable organic seeds. The farmer can then choose a non-organic seed, but only as long as there's a record to show it hasn't been treated or engineered.

However, Ryan says these rules only apply to field crops. Exceptions aren't allowed for organic microgreens, and in some cases, he doesn't have any organic seed options, which is why he grows both organic and conventional microgreens. Although one of the only providers of microgreen seeds in Canada is fully organic, they don't always offer a full range of microgreens. Microgreens are a tiny market compared to organic crops, so while Ryan doesn't expect the standards to change, he's hopeful that one day, all his microgreens will be certified organic.

## 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](http://organicalberta.org/getthefacts) and:

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