ORGANIC VEGETABLES

- Yuma is known as the nation’s epicenter of winter vegetable production, and this includes vegetables grown using conventional and organic production schemes. Over 6000 acres of organic produce is grown annually in the region, up from roughly 4,500 acres just 10 years ago. The organic acreage is still considered small, especially when compared to over 120,000 acres of conventionally grown produce.

- As close as anyone can determine, the first use of the term "organic" in the US was in 1940. J.I. Rodale coined it in an article for the publication Fact Digest. Shortly thereafter, he launched Organic Farming and Gardening (OFG) magazine — for many years the flagship publication of Rodale Press.

- As organic farming and marketing entered the 1970s, it began to develop as an industry. As a result, a clearer definition was needed to distinguish it and its products from conventional agriculture. This was no straightforward task. Environmental issues and other alternative agriculture philosophies had created diverse notions about what organic agriculture was and what it should be.

- A particularly problematic image grew unexpectedly from the anti-pesticide movement of the 1960s. This was the romantic notion that organic simply meant "doing next-to-nothing." In this exploitative approach, not only were pesticides avoided, sound farming practices that built the soil were also largely ignored. The results achieved on such farms were predictable, as yields were low and the quality poor. These approaches became collectively known as organic by neglect and are a far cry from the responsible farming models proposed by Albert Howard and J.I. Rodale.

- In 2002, the USDA adopted the National Organic Standard that spells out what farmers and food processors must (and must not) do to be certified "organic." Under this system, a state-run or accredited private agency (the third-party) evaluates farmers and processors to see whether they conform to the standards of the National Organic Program. Those who do can then market their products as "USDA Certified Organic" and display the official USDA organic seal on their packaging.

- Between 1997 and 2001, organic cropland acreage increased nearly 75 percent nationally. In Arizona, organic cropland increased nearly 150 percent during the same period. In 2007, 1.8 million acres of land were devoted to certified organic crop production and another 1 million to certified organic pastures in the United States. While certified organic production is increasing at a high rate, the overall percentage of land in certified organic crop production is low—0.3 percent and in certified organic pastures 0.2 percent.

- Organic production has increased in the Salinas Valley of California, which is the largest producer of cool-season vegetables (e.g., lettuces, cole crops, celery) in the nation. Many large-scale conventional farmers are converting a portion of their land to organic production.
Thus, there is a potential for organic production practices to be integrated into their conventional production as well.

- The use of genetically modified organisms is prohibited in certified organic production. Seed, transplants, and other planting stock must be organically produced. Exceptions can be made when no commercial organic seed or planting stock is available (due to a crop failure, for example). In this case, untreated, nonorganic seeds and planting stock can be used.

- New farms that have not been in conventional production or have not had any prohibited chemicals or practices for the past 3 years may acquire organic certification almost immediately. If the land has been used in conventional production or has had prohibited materials used within the past 3 years, it will be required to undergo 3 years of transitional production following approved organic practices before it can be certified. During this time, it cannot use the term “organic” but may indicate it is in transition. Prohibited substances are typically synthetic substances that are not allowed under the National Organic Program. They include chemical fertilizers and synthetic herbicides and insecticides.

- Organic vegetable growers need to document on maps where crops are planted from year to year, to ensure their crop rotation avoids the planting of the same pest and disease hosts in subsequent years.

- Organic transplants must be used when selling an organic crop. Non-organic tubers or rhizomes can be used for an organic crop, if they are proven that they are not available as organic. Perennial crops such as strawberries must either be organic plants or have been under organic management on land for 1 year before an organic harvest can be taken.

- Use of manures and the definition of compost is very strictly regulated under the U.S. organic law. If the edible portion of a crop is in contact with soil particles (this would include splashing that might occur from rain or irrigation for tall or trellised crops), then manure cannot be applied any sooner to the soil than 120 days before the harvest of the crop.

- Documentation is an important aspect of organic farming. During the transition years a record keeping system should be developed for each operation. Field activities, inputs, storage and sales information, will be needed once the farm is certified for organic. These records are a valuable historical reference, detailing the ranch’s unique growing conditions, and will aid you in making yearly management decisions.

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