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Finding Success Through Organic Production



Just a few years ago, organically produced plants were seen as a consumer luxury and pioneering growing field. Today, organics are entering the mainstream, and more and more growers are looking to jump into the fray.

Above: Florexp's facility in Costa Rica. Inset: Ocimum basilicum 'Greek Columnar'

By Chris Berg

Sustainability and organics are buzzwords that come up over and over. It's a great concept: health of planet, preserving resources, protecting future generations. But at the end of the day, can you make money doing the right thing? Walking through my local "hippie market" here in California, it seems that segments of all industries have already made the switch to organic production.

Two years ago, most people would not have thought about organic cereal or milk, but now it's a mainstream selection in many specialty food stores. More importantly, though, this trend is no longer exclusive to local markets.

It's making its way to the big players like Wal-Mart, Albertsons and Safeway. Consumers no longer see organic products as a premium — they're a basic expectation. Major supermarket chains are reporting more than 20 percent increases in sales growth of organic lines versus 1 to 3 percent in traditional groceries. So why is it taking so long for the green industry to catch on?

Organic growing is an increasingly attractive alternative for many operations. By adopting organic practices, growers have reduced costs, improved their bottom line and conserved resources while providing health and environmental benefits. Within traditional agriculture, ▶

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Top: Fernando Altmann Jr. is head grower of the Florexpo's organic program. **Bottom:** Thymus vulgaris

many farmers have found that organic production techniques increase both yields and profits, yet organic agriculture still represents only a small percentage of the total.

I had the pleasure of speaking with three growers who have made the switch to organic production. Florexpo, the Plug Connection and Elzinga & Hoeksema Greenhouses have all adopted USDA Certified Organic herb programs to take advantage of this rapidly growing, long-term market. Each of these growers has unique reasons for going organic and has encountered their own obstacles along the way, but their efforts have provided a uniform result: a strong economic contribution to their businesses.

Adding Value Through Organics

The Plug Connection, a Southern California-based liner producer, made the switch to organic production in 2005. "We saw this as a great opportunity for our business," says owner Tim Wada. "It's not only the right thing to do, but it's where our industry needs to go." Wada says organic production of food crops will be the standard, not the exception, in garden centers across North America in the future. "Right now, it adds value to our business because we were the first to come to market; in the future, though, all growers are going to need to make this transition to be listed with retailers."

Organic markets have expanded nationwide. Mark Elzinga of Elzinga & Hoeksema Greenhouses in Kalamazoo, Mich., also wanted to be a part of the strong trend that he saw emerging. Elzinga has been historically active

in local fruit markets and has long seen the growing demand for organics. When it hit his primary customer — the supermarkets — he was ready to jump on board. "We did this for two reasons: First, it was the right thing to do for our employees, our environment and our operation; second, [we saw] that the market is finally ready," he says. Elzinga believes that the average consumer in his market is willing to pay more for the higher value that organics bring and their family's health.

A Need for Organic Growers

The largest obstacle that the Plug Connection has faced as a liner producer is that there aren't enough finished growers like Elzinga that have switched over to get their operations certified for organic production. Many growers feel that the changes for certification would be too expensive or complex, and this misconception among growers has delayed the overall takeoff of the program. "We see a continual growth with our Organiks line, but we're still not where we projected we'd be at this time three years ago," Wada explains.

In addition to establishing the organic customer base, the Plug Connection had some initial growing pains finding certified material. The process of holding organic mother stock on varieties was too expensive, and there wasn't an off-shore provider for year-round cuttings.

Obtaining Certification

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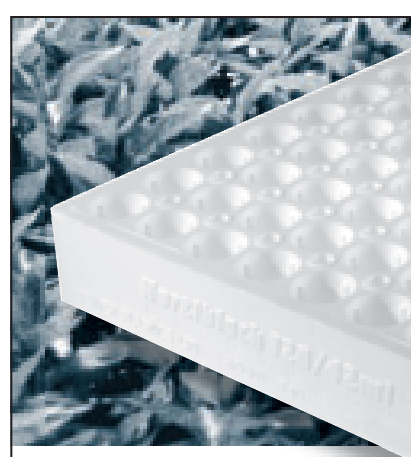





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off-shore organic production. Florexpo has a long history of producing vegetative herb cuttings, so they were familiar with the line — it was a matter of adapting to new protocols and finding the market. “We owe a lot to Tim Wada and the Plug Connection for helping us to get started — they have been committed to organic production for years and were looking for a partner to help them with their vegetative liner production,” says Altmann Sr. Before organic production was established at Florexpo, domestic growers like the Plug Connection and Elzinga needed to hold their own organic stock plants, a costly and unreliable source of plant starts.

Getting USDA certification in Costa Rica was not as difficult as Florexpo first expected, but it did take some time. For six months, the farm hired an independent consultant from the United States to assist and educate them in protocols and incorporating facility improvements that needed to be completed prior to the official inspection. Stock plants also needed to go through a one-year certification process before they could be sold as certified organic. When the facilities were ready and the plants had been grown under the organic conditions,



the CCOF was the organization to grant them the USDA approval.

Increasing Quality and Performance

Fernando Altmann Jr., the head grower of the organic program at Florexpo, maintains 35,000 stock plants under USDA certification. He has reported a significant increase in plant health since organic production began. “Our cuttings are stronger and ship better than we ever experienced with the conventional program,” he says. During the development of the program, the research team at Florexpo worked on developing other sustainable



Top: *Salvia officinalis* 'Icterina' Bottom: *Salvia* 'Berggarten'

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applications that are now implemented in their integrated pest management program across the farm. "We don't limit what we use in the organic houses to just the herbs," Altmann Jr. says. "We're using these beneficial practices across all of our product lines, such as annuals and perennials, for improved performance."

Altmann Jr. is not the only grower who found that organic production methods increased quality and healthier plants. Mark Elzinga says he has made significant efforts and facility changes to comply with a fully organic finished herb program. His biggest challenge was finding available materials such as soil, fertilizers and beneficials. "We didn't realize that soils sold as organic don't fit the criteria for USDA certification due to additives they contain." Elzinga tasked his team with designing their own soil mixes and facilities to brew composted tea. It took the operation some time to learn the new chemistries of these blends, but those efforts resulted in stronger, healthier plants. Elzinga now plans to incorporate his new soils and fertility programs throughout all his production.

Sustainable Production Moving Forward

Each of these organizations has a slightly different outlook on where the market will go, but all are certain that it will only go up. Altmann Sr. doesn't believe that the whole industry will ever go fully organic, but he says that it's definitely getting stronger and sustainable production is here to stay. "We have customers buying the certified cuttings now who

don't have a certified program themselves, but they believe in purchasing healthy plant starts with no chemical applications." Other growers, including Wada and Elzinga, agree that the trend is here long term, and both believe that organic production is going to be the standard and no longer the luxury product.

So where does a grower begin? The good news is that two of the earlier obstacles — supply and demand — are problems of the past. With off-shore production of plant starts and supermarket retailers' demand for organics booming, a certified organic grower is sure to find success. The CCOF is the only full-service organization for USDA Certified approval, offering personalized assistance to help growers get their operations up to standards with the organic protocols and education on growing and using sustainable practices. The pioneering growers of this market have proven that operations today can do the right thing in preserving environments for future generations while also contributing to a greener bottom line. **GPN**

Chris Berg is business development and marketing manager with McGregor Plant Sales. He can be reached at cberg@mcgregorps.com or (760) 431-1006.

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