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Organic Cranberry Management

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Organic Cranberry Management

Organic crop production is the fastest growing portion of U.S. agriculture, increasing a minimum of 20% annually during the last 15 years. The establishment of federal guidelines for organic certification in 2002 provided a structure for producers and processors to market certified organic foods. The guidelines provide the general provisions and processes for obtaining and maintaining organic certification, but do not specifically determine the best management practices for crop production within the organically approved methods. There is limited research on organic cranberry production for Massachusetts. This BMP was written primarily with the help of active organic MA cranberry farmers who were willing to share their experiences to help guide others.

Anyone interested in growing organic fruit should first familiarize themselves with the federal and state regulations that define organic food. The USDA's National Organic Program regulates the standard for any farm, wild crop harvesting or handling operation that wants to sell an agricultural product as organically produced. See web sites listed as the end of the BMP.

Growing cranberries under an organic program can be challenging, especially in Massachusetts, where pest pressures can be quite high. Clearly evaluate your risk before starting an organic operation. Pest management can be difficult even when using conventional pesticides; situations may be even harder in organic systems.

Recommended Practices

Select a good location and bog type.

It is best to use bog systems with naturally low pest pressure and an ample water supply to optimize chances of success. In general, native peat-based bogs are more conducive to organic production compared to mineral bogs.

Establish, utilize and operate a bog system and water resource that is isolated from non-organic farms. Your water source(s) is considered part of the farm and will also need to be certified organic.

Choose native varieties.

Native cranberry varieties (e.g., Early Black, Howes) may be better choices for organic production than hybrids (observational input).

Scout weekly for insects by using sweep nets, starting in early May.

Use of sweep nets is important in both conventional and organic systems. This technique allows you to monitor current insect populations and make any needed management decisions as necessary.

Learn to correctly identify insects in your sweep net.

Black-headed fireworm can be a serious problem on organic bogs. Consider holding a winter flood to minimize black-headed fireworm populations.

Cultural practices (sanding and flooding) offer the most effective pest control for organic production.

Use late water floods to control cranberry fruitworm, cutworms, Southern red mite, and minimize fruit rot issues. Fall floods can be used to manage cranberry girdler and dewberry populations. Sanding can help manage girdler and dodder populations. Winter floods can help reduce the abundance of many insect pests.

During the 3-year transition period, hold late water floods for pest management. Consider repairing or renovating weak areas during the transition period.

Engage in any relevant cultural practice that will improve canopy air circulation.

Hand-weeding is the most common form of organic weed control and will typically be needed on an annual basis.

Ensure that the bog is as level as possible; this will help achieve maximize results with flooding techniques and minimize water use requirements. Make sure your pumps run efficiently so you can quickly flood for pest management or other issues as needed.

Keep good records of cultural practices and water use.

Good records will be your best resource for managing your farm in future years. If you experiment with different management techniques, maintaining accurate notes and observations will be a solid practice.

Obtain organic certification.

The farm needs to be certified if you want to sell, label, or represent your product as organic. Certification is the process where a producer or handler is approved by an Accredited Certifying Agent as being in compliance with the National Organic Program (NOP) regulations and is then authorized to sell, label, or represent products as being “certified organic”. An applicant must submit specific information to a certifying agent to engage in the process (see USDA NOP web site) and once certified, annual inspections will be conducted. Applicants must keep accurate records for 5 years to show compliance with issues regarding aspects of production, harvesting, and handling of their products. However, producers and handling operations that sell less than \$5,000 per year in organic products do not need certification. Although exempt, you must abide by the national standard for organic products and may label your products as organic. Currently, the certifying agent for Massachusetts is Baystate Organic Certifiers.

Visit the Baystate Organic Certifiers web site <http://www.baystateorganic.org/> or contact: Don Franczyk, 774-872-5544.

Determine if there are any significant hindrances that would prevent certification of the operation before investing time, energy, and money.

Make sure you are prepared to handle and produce the needed paperwork, reporting, and inspecting to receive and maintain your certification.

Formulate a business plan for how your fruit will be sold and handled.

This is one of the most important decisions that you will make and should be done during the development phase of the organic farming operation. Will you be selling your fruit to an established handler or will you sell your fruit directly to retailers or consumers? Will you be making a value-added product or selling fresh fruit?

Yields will likely drop during the transition phase and your business plan needs to account for this.

The drop in production (if the bog had been in conventional management) will occur without a corresponding increase in fruit market value. This could be a significant barrier to entry into the organic market.

Consult the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) lists of approved compounds.

OMRI provides organic certifiers, growers, manufacturers, and suppliers an independent review of products intended for use in certified organic production, handling, and processing. OMRI reviews products against the National Organic Standards. Acceptable products are OMRI Listed® and appear on the *OMRI Products List*, <http://www.omri.org/>.

Consult with other growers who are currently growing cranberries organically.

Some of the best advice will come from growers who are actively practicing organic cranberry production. Talk to them about recommendations and pitfalls concerning all aspects of production and business issues.

Attend organic farming conferences to keep current on new and innovative techniques.

Consider attending the annual NOFA conference <http://www.nofamass.org/index.php> or other meetings relating to organic farming. Although not specifically related to cranberry, these forums provide an opportunity to meet and exchange with other organic farmers.

For more information:

Massachusetts Chapter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association, 411 Sheldon Road, Barre, MA 01005. (978) 355-2853. <http://www.nofamass.org/index.php>.

Organic Materials Review Institute <http://www.omri.org/>

USDA National Organic Program web site
http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/s.7_0_A/7_0_1OB?navid=ORGANIC_CERTIFICATIO

Baystate Organic Certifiers (PDF)

1220 Cedarwood Circle

N. Dighton, MA 02764

Contact: Don Franczyk

Phone: 774-872-5544

Fax: 774-872-5545

E-mail: baystateorganic@earthlink.net

<http://www.baystateorganic.org/>.

Scope: crop, livestock, wild crop, handling

Accredited: 4/29/02

Prepared by Hilary Sandler, Jen Friedrich, and Keith Mann, 2010.

Organic Cranberry Management Checklist

- ✓ Become familiar with all related federal regulation regarding organic farming and certification.
- ✓ Develop a whole farm business plan.
- ✓ Establish working relationships with other organic cranberry growers.
- ✓ Attend organic food and farming conferences and educational workshops.