
ORGANIC HISTORY

Overview

Before becoming a national program, organic began as a movement in the agricultural community. This movement has a rich history with many important contributions from people all over the world. This module includes assignments, readings, and a question bank to help students explore the history of the organic movement and the people involved.

Learning Objectives

Concepts

- Organic agriculture took shape during a time when the Green Revolution dominated U.S. agriculture.
- The organic movement gained in popularity in the 1960's and 1970's, infusing the movement with broader social and environmental themes.
- Federal involvement was the result of a combination of factors including a growing market, concerns over fraud, trade, and food scares.

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Assignment: The History of Organic

These questions can be paired with the History of Organic Reading and Organic Movement Timeline.

Multiple Choice

- (Choose one) The foundation of the organic movement was centered on which principle?
 - Maintaining soil health
 - Not using synthetic fertilizers
 - Relying solely on indigenous farming techniques
 - Not using machinery
- (Choose one) Which of these was NOT part of the purpose of the Federal Organic Foods Production Act?
 - (Establish national standards for organic products.)
 - (Assure consumers that organically produced products meet a consistent standard.)
 - (Facilitate interstate commerce in food that is organically produced.)
 - (Develop a definition of conventional agriculture.)
- (Choose all that apply) Which new developments were part of the Green Revolution?
 - (Breeding of new crop varieties)
 - (Advances in irrigation technology)
 - (Pesticide and synthetic fertilizer developments)
 - (Composting technologies)
- (Choose one) Which of these is NOT a reason for the creation of federal organic standards?
 - (Growing popularity of organic foods in the marketplace)
 - (Discrepancies between standards among different certifiers)
 - (Concerns over organic fraud)
 - (Breakdown of farmers associations)
- (Choose all that apply) What program is responsible for setting nationwide standards for organic production?
 - (NOP)
 - (USDA)
 - (OMRI)
 - (SARE)
- In 2014, the number of certified organic farms in the United States was between:
 - 1-5000
 - 5001-10,000
 - 10,000-19,999
 - 20,000-50,000
- In 2014, the value of organic products in the United States was between:
 - 5 million – 10 million
 - 11-million – 1 billion
 - 2 billion – 6 billion
 - 7 billion – 10 billion

Matching

8. Match the event with its contribution to the organic movement:

1960's and 70's counter culture movement	(Allowed organic farmers to share knowledge)
The environmental movement	(Gave organic production federal recognition)
Formation of farmers associations	(Created concern over pesticide use in agriculture)
Creation of National Organic Program	(Highlighted social issues within the food system)

9. Rank these commodities from highest to lowest based on price:

Apples
Lettuce
Eggs
Spinach
Milk

10. Rank these events in order of occurrence:

The USDA creates a research program for sustainable ag
The environmental and counterculture movements
National Organic Program created
The Green Revolution begins
Farmer associations form

11. Match these people to their contribution to the organic movement:

Albert Howard	(Introduced the farm as a living organism)
Rachel Carson	(Popularized the organic movement)
Jerome Rodale	(Introduced the 'Law of Return')
Walter Northbourne	(Sparked the environmental movement)

True/False

12. National Organic Program is not part of the Agricultural Marketing Service branch of the US Department of Agriculture. (F)
13. Organic agriculture is a counterpoint to the Green Revolution. (T)
14. The United States Department of Agriculture is a part of the federal government. (T)
15. Organic farmers in the 1970's were more likely to get advice from University Extension than their local farmer's association. (F)
16. In 2014, Maine had the most certified organic farms in the United States. (F)
17. Hired labor is one of the top production expenses on organic farms in 2014. (T)

Key: History of Organic

Instructors can email Randa Jabbour (rjabbour@uwyo.edu) from their institutional email address to request the key.

Notes to Instructors

People in the Movement

Lesson Notes

This assignment is designed to follow a reading on the history of the organic movement. Besides the reading and timeline included in this module, there are a number of other history readings provided in 'Resources' that may also be used to give background for this assignment.

An alternative strategy to a writing assignment could be to have short in-class presentations in which each student represents a person from the organic movement, possibly presented in chronological order.

Assignment: People in the Movement

The reading mentions several key people and organizations in the history of organic agriculture, however as an international movement, there have been countless people involved for the last century. Find another person that played an important role in the history of the organic movement that was not discussed in the reading. Write 400 words on how this person influenced the organic movement. Be sure to include information on this individual's background (e.g. occupation, how they became involved in organic agriculture), their role in the movement, and how they might have had a lasting influence. Include at least two sources for where you found your information. Even though we are focusing on organic agriculture in the US, you are welcome to research a historical figure from anywhere around the world!

It might initially be difficult to dig past FH King and Rodale, here are a few helpful starting points:

- International Organic Ag Action Group list: <http://www.ifoam.bio/en/history/pioneers>
- UC Santa Cruz Sustainable Ag Oral Histories Project: <https://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/cultiv/organizations>
- National Ag Library Collection of Oral Histories: <https://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/oral-history-interview-series>

Resources

Print

Hansen, Anne Larkin. 2010. "Back to the Roots: The Story of Organic Farming." *The Organic Farming Manual: A comprehensive guide to starting and running a certified organic farm.* Storey Publishing, 11-30.

This resources is a guide for running a certified farm, this chapter outlines the history of the organic movement and the National Organic Program. Also included in the chapter are farmer profiles and definitions.

Heckman, J. 2005. A history of organic farming: Transitions from Sir Albert Howard's War in the Soil to USDA National Organic Program. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems.* 21(3), 143-150.

This paper details the origins of the organic farming movement, tensions between organic and non-organic concepts, and the recognition of organic agriculture and formation of the NOP.

Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. Title XXI of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-624).

*PDF available online at: <http://tw-toc.com/upload/20160223152526037.pdf>
This is a primary resource. The Organic Foods Production Act was part of the 1990 Farm Bill and was foundational in the development of the National Organic Program.*

Francis, Charles, Justin Van Wart. 2009. "History of Organic Farming and Certification." *Organic Farming: The Ecological System*, edited by Charles Francis, American Society of Agronomy, 3-17.

This chapter outlines the history of organic, beginning with a broader look at agricultural history. The end of this chapter includes discussion questions and references.

Conford, Philip, and Jonathan Dimbleby. *The Origins of the Organic Movement.* Floris Books, 2001.

This book follows the organic movement including insights into the political climate of the era.

Lockeretz, William. *Organic Farming: an International History.* Cabi Publishing, 2007.

*PDF available online at:
<http://base.dnsgb.com.ua/files/book/Agricult-Agr/Organic-Agriculture/Organic-Farming-An-International-History>.*

The book outlines the organic movement. Each chapter includes a list of references which may be useful if looking for further resources.

Web

UCSC Cultivating a Movement: Organic and Sustainable Farming Oral Histories

<https://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/cultiv/home>
This is a collection of oral histories from farmers, educators, researchers, retailers and activists recounting the organic and sustainable farming movement.

IFOAM Organics International Organic Pioneers

<http://www.ifoam.bio/en/history/pioneers>
This webpage includes a list of some of the pioneers of the organic movement. Included are brief biographies and descriptions of achievements in organic agriculture.

USDA National Ag Library Oral History Interview Series

<https://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/oral-history-interview-series>

This is collection of oral histories focused on people involved in alternative and sustainable agriculture. Each history includes an introduction and was conducted via a video interview.

A timeline of organic agriculture

From movement to federal program in the U.S.

1840

Justus Von Liebig publishes *Chemistry in its Application to Agriculture and Physiology* signifying the start of the 'NPK Mentality'



1940

Sir Albert Howard publishes *An Agricultural Testament*, introducing some of the foundational ideas for organic agriculture. Walter Northbourne publishes *Look to the Land*, which describes the farm as a living organism.

1962

Rachel Carson publishes *Silent Spring* which leads to a ban on DDT and sparks concern over pesticide use in agriculture.



1973

Formation of CCOF (California Certified Organic Farmers).

1980

USDA publishes the *Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming* in order to "increase communication between organic farmers and the USDA"

1988

SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) program begins.



1997

OMRI (the Organic Materials Review Institute), a nonprofit organization is founded to independently review products for use in certified organic production.



1930's

Start of the Green Revolution spurred by higher yielding varieties, new machinery and agro-chemicals

1942



Jerome Rodale begins publishing a magazine titled *Organic Farming and Gardening*, popularizing and promoting organic agriculture.

1971



Vermont establishes organic certification standards through NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association) and the formation of MOFGA (Maine Organic Farming Association).

1979

California law creates standards for organic production.

1980's

Land Grant Universities begin offering college courses on organic agriculture.

1990

The Federal Organic Foods Production Act is passed. This act was meant to: 1.) establish national standards for organic products 2.) Assure consumers that organically produced products meet a consistent standard and 3.) to facilitate interstate commerce in food that is organically produced.

2002



The USDA implements the National Organic Program, which establishes the standards for organically-produced agricultural products, maintains the lists of allowed and prohibited substances, and accredits certifying agents to certify organic farmers.

History of organic agriculture in the U.S.

Beginnings of the Movement

Sir Albert Howard is credited with developing many of the foundational ideas of organic agriculture. Howard spent 26 years of his career in India, conducting agricultural research and learning techniques from indigenous farmers^{1,2}. Upon returning to England, he later published *An Agricultural Testament* in 1940, where he introduced “The Law of Return” (where organic waste is returned to the soil to improve soil health and fertility) and composting methods. Howard was not the only one to draw on the farming examples of indigenous peoples. F. H. King, a former United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) official, published *Farmers of Forty Centuries, Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea, and Japan* where he describes the agricultural practices that have allowed farmers in these regions to farm without exhausting the soil for generations¹.

Walter Northbourne’s *Look to the Land* (1940) described the farm as a living organism or “organic whole” where nutrients were recycled¹. Lady Eve Balfour attempted a study to compare organic vs. non-organic farms, and published the book *The Living Soil* in 1943. Jerome Rodale was a publisher, business man, and fan of Howard’s work¹. He began publishing a magazine, *Organic Farming and Gardening*, which would help popularize the concept of organic in the U.S.¹. The Rodale Press continues in popularity and the Rodale Institute (founded in 1947 in Pennsylvania) conducts long-term organic agricultural research.

Despite these early efforts, the development of the organic agriculture movement in the U.S. remained slow throughout the post-war period as the country was largely focused on productivity and developing new technologies². During this time there was a lot of tension between proponents of organic agriculture and those outside the movement, where organic was described as a cult and fanciful¹.

Gaining Momentum

In the 1960’s and 70’s there is a surge of interest in organic farming and organic products. At this time the number of farming communes increased by 5x, circulation of Rodale’s magazine skyrocketed, and food co-ops became more common². This surge in interest by the counterculture had social implications that would stay with the movement:

“ Resistance to industrialization, urbanization, modernization and rationalization can all be found in various elements of the organic movement. The embrace of organic agriculture by the counterculture in the 1960’s and 1970’s infused an anticapitalistic component within the movement. In many ways organic was viewed, first and foremost, as a social issue during this era.² ”

At the same time, the environmental movement was beginning to take shape with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* published in 1962. *Silent Spring* documented the harmful effects that the insecticide DDT was having on bird populations. Carson’s work sparked new concern over the health and safety of chemicals used in agriculture and the eventual establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970³.

The Green Revolution

While the organic movement was getting off the ground, modern agriculture was undergoing a major change, called the “Green Revolution,” signaled by large increases in crop yields. These increases were the result of research and new technology in agriculture: the development of higher-yielding crop varieties, pesticides, irrigation technologies, and synthetic fertilizers⁴. The advances in fertilizers built on earlier foundational work in plant nutrition. In the mid-1800’s chemists discovered that plants take up nutrients within organic matter and manure, and not the organic matter itself. This finding led to the development of inorganic fertilizers that could replace manure to provide nutrients to plants, a central step in the advancement of modern agriculture in the following decades³.

Defining Organic

With mounting criticism from the food industry and the federal government over what organic truly meant, those within the movement recognized a need to define what organic agriculture was². Additionally, with the rise in popularity of organic among consumers, there was growing concern of fraud as well². As a result, efforts to self-regulate began in 1971. Rodale began certifying organic farms using a set of rules, record-keeping, and soil testing⁴. Because of the influence of the counterculture movement, there was resistance

National Organic Program (NOP)

The NOP is a federal program housed within the Agricultural Marketing Service branch of the USDA. The NOP is responsible for several activities related to organic agriculture including:

- Develop regulations on organic standards
- Maintain the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances
- Accredite certifying agents to certify organic producers
- Investigate and enforce regulation violations
- Establish import and export policies for international trade

among farmers to have government regulation of their practices, prompting them to self-organize with the formation of local organizations such as the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), and the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF)². These associations became places for farmers to develop guidelines for organic certification, but also to share knowledge about organic farming, given the lack of support from land grant universities.

In the decades to follow, the market for organic foods gained momentum and by 1989 there were over 40 certifying agencies in the U.S and 30 U.S. states had developed laws or regulations for organic production². Around the same time, the USDA also began tracking organic price premiums, recognizing that there was now a distinct market for organic⁵. The combination of a growing organic market, a growing number of discrepancies between different certifiers, along with concerns over organic fraud, food scares, and environmental concerns from industrial agriculture, spurred the Federal Organic Foods Production Act in

1990. The three goals of this act were to 1) establish national standards governing marketing for organic products, 2) assure consumers that organically produced products meet a consistent standard and 3) facilitate interstate commerce in fresh and processed food that is organically produced. This act eventually led to the establishment of the National Organic Program in 2002, which set nation-wide standards for organic production.

Key Points

1. Organic agriculture took shape during a time of Green Revolution dominated U.S. agriculture.
2. Foundational ideas revolved around promoting soil fertility through overall soil health.
3. The movement gained popularity in the 1960's and 70's, infusing the movement with broader social & environmental themes.
4. Local organic associations were the first means of organizing organic farmers and formalizing organic practices.
5. Federal involvement was the result of a combination of factors including a growing market, concerns over fraud, trade, and food scares.

References

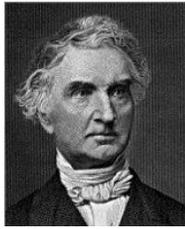
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1997

The Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI), a nonprofit organization is founded to independently review products for use in certified organic production.



1930's

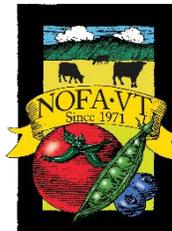
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