



Philosophical Ponderings of a Farmer

Organic Certification and the Micro-Farm Model

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I've had a few folks ask me if I'm Certified Organic. The official answer is "no." I'm not "Certified" but all my growing practices are "Organic." At Hopscotch, my goal is to create a regenerative system that focuses on soil health, environmental health, and nutrient dense produce. I employ a "low till" system with minimal mechanized equipment, and irrigate almost exclusively with drip. Soil fertility and plant health is maintained with the use of organic compost, organic soil amendments, organic foliar sprays, and cover crops.

While my multi-plot model does not lend itself to certification (I have too many locations that are too small for the appropriate buffers), I do find myself wondering whether or not I would become certified if I were farming all in one place.

In the Pacific Northwest, it seems much more common for small producers to be certified. After all, it is an easy way for customers to know what types of practices a farm employs. However, in Arizona, few small producers are certified. This is partially because there is no organic certifier residing in the state (so one has to travel from a neighboring state which is very costly to the producer), but also because many of the farmers I worked with were operating on a very small scale. A scale that allows more interaction between producers and customers. And at this point, certification seems less important. When you already know your farmer, you know that you can be confident that her products are highly nutritious, flavorful, and support soil health.

Organic certification is also time consuming and costly. I would rather focus on my crops than on record keeping. (Plus the number of records that I'm already required to keep for my canned goods is ridiculous, bordering on hilarity.) When administrative work pulls you away from field work, it feels a bit "inorganic" in a way. And while organic certification helps assure customers that their food does not contain GMOs or chemical fertilizers/pesticides, I don't need to record my inputs for my customers to know I would never use these products.

I also want my farming practices to align with my values - I don't want to become certified just to be certified - I want my farm to embody the principles that the organic program was based upon, principles that have been lost or modified over time and with the popularity of organics today. When large scale, industrial farms become certified, with "organic" pesticides and highly mechanized equipment, it begins to feel very different from the smaller organic operations I know and love. I'm not trying to claim that there isn't space in today's crazy world for large scale organics (it's certainly better than industrial "conventional" farming), but it seems like these are two completely different production systems trying to operate under the same umbrella.

One interesting alternative to organic certification is Certified Naturally Grown. CNG farmers don't use GMOs or synthetic fertilizers/pesticides, just like certified organic farmers, but the program relies on peer to peer inspections, fostering learning opportunities amongst producers (less paperwork, more community!). CNG is something I may consider in the future, as my business begins to grow. And if it ends up growing a lot, Organic Certification may be in its more distant future. But I've got a lot of time to decide if that's the right choice.