Idaho Icon – the Potato – is Going Organic

With sturdy potato vines twining around his leather boots, Kris Taylor leans on his spade above a pile of just-dug organic spuds and grins. Then he shares his philosophy as a relatively new organic farmer, in his second year of growing organic potatoes.

“I like organic. It’s real easy: You just don’t do anything. Then you get a better price with a smaller yield and do well at the end of the day.” He’s not entirely serious, but he’s not joking, either. This year, his sales of organic russets to Potandon Produce, sold under the Green Giant label, were worth twice what he got for commercially grown spuds last year: $5 per hundredweight for commercial, $9.50 for organic.

The third generation farmer with Howard Taylor & Sons (HT&S) grows both organic and conventional spuds and hay, conventional barley, wheat and corn on more than 20,000 acres southwest of Idaho Falls.

For decades, families working the area’s sandy, volcanic soil have produced the “famous potatoes” for which Idaho is so well known. Recently, some spud growers here have begun looking at organic management.

Getting into Organic

Taylor says his family got interested in organics in 2004 because they have cattle and organic beef was bringing in a premium price.

“We changed our minds on organic cattle real quick, though. You could do it with 50 cows, but we had 3,000 mother cows, and that was too many—we had a co-mingling problem.” Taylor’s family realized it was too difficult to keep such a large number of organic cattle separate from conventional cattle, which are treated with nonorganic products.

“But that experience got us turned onto organics,” says Taylor. The family had also been talking about organic crops and in 2004 they started transitioning ground with alfalfa, but didn’t sell anything until a couple of years later when they developed a marketing plan with Jeff Bragg at Potandon Produce.

Taylor says although his family used to market all of their own produce, they decided to go with Potandon to market organic potatoes because of the Green Giant label. “With organic, you almost have to have a label to sell or you’re limited to farmer’s markets—there’s no steady market unless you have a label.”

In their second year with organic spuds, Taylor says the farm is getting better profit than
“Our organic rotation plan is two years of spuds, then a grain, then alfalfa for three years. If weeds get really bad, we rogue it. We get right on Canadian thistle. But alfalfa knocks that back quick — you can eliminate it in two years just by using hay. Or use mustard cover crops.”

Taylor says that crop rotation can also help with pests and diseases and he hasn’t had much trouble with either. “This field was a piece of cake because it had previously grown alfalfa, so nitrogen was high when we began, and the field was weed- and disease-free.” He also noted the lack of pressure from Colorado potato beetles, because the field is so isolated.

Crop rotation also plays a part in nutrient management, by eliminating phosphorus accumulation in the soil from cattle manure-based compost.

“We have been using compost for about five years on everything, even on our conventional ground,” says Taylor. “We apply 10 to 12 tons per acre on organic fields, three to five tons an acre on conventional, depending on the crop. We need compost for nitrogen and organic matter, but if we compost regularly, we get phosphorus build-up.”

Taylor says that University of Idaho researchers worry about phosphate climbing above 40 parts per million in his area, but that a hay rotation depletes phosphorus.

**Organic Markets**

Experimenting and taking risks are all in a day’s work for organic growers — it’s not a job to be taken lightly, even though the market for organic products is increasing at nearly 20 percent a year.
Potandon Produce located in Idaho Falls, Idaho sells organic potatoes, including those grown by Kris Taylor, with its organic Green Giant logo.

Photograph courtesy of Matt Henninger

“The market is offering very good prices for organic grain now,” Taylor says, “so we’ll do 150 acres in organic wheat next year. But the first year with organic grain can be a wreck, figuring out how to keep the weeds out. And with spuds, you’re competing for consumers, so size and quality matter.”

Organic potato wholesalers prefer 6- to 9-ounce potatoes, but about half Taylor’s crop doesn’t meet this standard. With no organic dehydration processing available locally, these good but not-so-pretty potatoes are sold to organic dairies or feedlots as cattle feed for a lot less than organic fresh potatoes would fetch for human consumption.

“There are processing facilities nearby, but they are not organic,” Taylor explains. “Some could be, if we had a big enough block of organic potatoes at the same time to run efficiently, but that’s tough to do now. You have to clean a conventional dehydrator line out to run organic. Processing plants are geared up for big sheds—maybe 10,000 sacks a day. Organic sheds are small, running relatively few sacks a day. After you wash them and they’re wet, spuds have to go to either a processor or a feedlot right away. It would be hard to get enough together from the organic producers to fill a line for very long.”

Under federal law, if quality and quantity are available, farmers need to use organically grown seed stock, which is a challenge to Taylor and other organic spud growers. He says growers can’t get quality organic seed in large enough quantities today. But that could change as national demand continues to expand, according to experts like Alec McErlich, agricultural R&D manager for Small Planet Foods (General Mills’ organic foods division), who advises organic growers.

“A sizeable section of the market is demanding organic produce,” says McErlich.

He points out that more than two in three, or 69 percent, of U.S. consumers buy organic and 12 percent buy organic on a weekly basis, according to the 2008 report by the Hartman Group.

“There’s a little slowdown now but annual growth in the organic food and beverage market is still 17 to 18 percent (it’s 3 percent for conventionally grown). The United States still has a relatively small percentage of organic acres, but it’s growing. And there’s a trickle-down effect on conventional agriculture. In wheat management, for example, there has been a huge increase in herbicide resistant weeds, and growers are saying, ‘What can we do?’ That leads them to do more mechanical cultivation, which can be more economical than using chemicals, even with the cost of gas. And don’t forget: Pesticides are petroleum-based, too!”

Jeff Bragg with Potandon Produce in Idaho Falls agrees with McErlich’s prediction.

“As the largest shipper of Idaho potatoes and the largest marketer of potatoes in North America, we sell to retail grocery chains and food service companies everywhere. Our customers are demanding we provide organic,” says Bragg. But he adds that some areas need work.

“Organic agronomy in Idaho is in its infancy. Field men don’t understand organic products. As production increases, agronomy will become more important. Idaho is a natural place to promote organic agriculture, but we need the kind of framework conventional farmers have: growers, fertilizer dealers, buyers and processors who work together.”

While a handful of Idaho farmers have been growing organic potatoes for decades, less than 0.1% of Idaho’s potato acres have been organic. Organic potato acres increased from a few hundred to just more than 1,000 acres in the last two years, as Taylor and other farmers have transitioned.

Taylor’s advice to growers considering a move to organic is to be realistic.

“Don’t expect high yields and high quality, starting out. There’s a lot of learning the first couple of years. What I’ve seen is expect less yield but get more money out of organic — anything organic.”

Boise-based free-lance writer Diane Ronayne is a frequent contributor to The Farmer Exchange.
Additional Resources:


Pest Management Strategic Plan for Organic Potato Production in the West (http://www.ipmcenters.org/pmsp/index.cfm) Available December 2008. This plan highlights the pest and weed management practices used by organic potato farmers in five western states and identifies and sets priorities for organic potato research and education.


For more information on NCAP’s sustainable agriculture program, contact Jennifer Miller at (208) 850-6504 or jmiller@pesticide.org. NCAP’s main office address is P.O. Box 1393, Eugene, OR 97440. (541) 344-5044. www.pesticide.org.

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