


# Organics 101: What you need to know



**What are organics?**  
The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines organic agriculture as "the application of a set of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity."

**But what does that really mean?**  
Organic produce is grown without the use of chemical inputs or genetically modified organisms. It is grown using practices defined by the USDA that protect natural resources, conserve biodiversity, and use only approved substances.

**What does "certified organic" mean?**  
"Certified organic" means that the product has been grown according to the USDA's organic standards and it has been certified by a USDA-accredited certifying agent. Produce that has been grown according to the standards but is not grown by a certified producer cannot carry the "certified organic" label. Only products that are "certified organic" can carry the USDA seal.

**What are the requirements for displaying organics?**  
Organics must be kept separate from conventional produce. The organic item and the conventional item can be displayed side by side, but there must be a barrier between them. Many retailers find it more convenient and easier to separate organics into their own section to avoid unintentional comingling.

Organic produce that requires misting cannot be displayed below conventional produce that requires misting as the water running off the conventional produce can contaminate the organic items.

**What if I source produce from a small, local supplier?**  
Some small suppliers are exempt from the regulation requiring certification. Operations selling less than \$5,000 a year of organics do not have to be certified. Retailers should handle the product the same way they would handle "certified organic" products. However, the produce from the exempt supplier can only be labeled "organic." It cannot carry the "certified organic" label.

**Does organic produce have to be stored separately in the backroom and the cooler?**  
Organic produce can be stored with conventional produce as long as each is in its own container and no comingling occurs. Organic and conventional produce can share the same shipping method and even the same pallet as long as each type of produce is in a non-permeable container.

"Wet" produce must be stored with the organic items on top as dripping ice from conventional produce can drip down and contaminate the organic boxes if the organics are stored on the bottom.

Do not reuse containers that held conventionally grown produce for organic produce.

**Can retailers use the "certified organic" label on items they process themselves?**  
USDA regulations state that retailers do not need to be certified, but if stores process organic products on-site, they must prevent co-mingling with conventional produce and avoid contact with prohibited contaminants. Retailers cannot use the organic seal or the "certified organic" label unless they are a certified processor even if the produce being processed comes from a certified supplier. Retailers must comply with all organic labeling regulations on products processed in their stores. ●

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