Certified Naturally Grown

Grassroots Alternative to USDA Organic

by CLAIRE BONTEMPO

For many, the process to become certified organic is a laborious task. In addition to copious amounts of paperwork there is also, typically, an application and annual renewal fee, assessment on annual production or sales as well as inspection fees. All of these requirements vary depending on the size, type and complexity of the operation applying for certification. These costs can range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars. Post certification, though, there is potential to be reimbursed up to 75 percent of the certification costs through USDA Organic Certification Cost-Share Programs.

Some farmers, that find USDA Organic certification to be too arduous and not cost-effective for their operations, have renounced the certified organic label for logistical reasons despite maintaining the same natural management practices. In addition, certified organic status can be more difficult for farmers growing diverse crops to obtain because paperwork must be filled out per crop from seed to sale. That means for a diversified vegetable operation, which is recommended for best ecological and sustainable practices, it’s harder to meet those paperwork requirements. The establishment of the National Organic Program created a gap for small operation farmers who abided by natural practices but had no way of receiving recognition. In response, a group of farmers sought to fill this niche by establishing Certified Naturally Grown, a nonprofit that focuses on direct-market farms and apiaries using natural methods.

“We feel like we’re an important complement to the national organic program,” said Alice Varon, executive director of Certified Naturally Grown. “That program is serving a much larger group of producers because they also include the wholesale producers, the food processors and handlers, and Certified Naturally Grown is really only concerned with family-scale farmers producing food for their local communities.”

CNG: THE INS & OUTS

Certified Naturally Grown, or CNG, was founded in 2002 to provide an alternative to USDA’s organic certification.

The standards and growing requirements are based on rules set by the National Organic Program, but these standards are encouraged to evolve as CNG is always working to improve their system. According to Varon, there aren’t many differences between the produce standards for certified organic and CNG. However, the organic program does allow certain synthetic inputs for the sake of processed foods. CNG doesn’t certify processed foods, so such specifications are irrelevant to their program.

The CNG label means farmers don’t use any synthetic herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, antibiotics, hormones or genetically modified organisms. Livestock must be fed organic feed and raised mostly on pasture with space for freedom of movement. Varon explained that some livestock producers can’t afford or find certified organic feed; so CNG works with farmers and allows feed that is produced according to CNG standards. In some cases, local farmers will even grow grains needed by neighboring livestock producers.

While CNG may not have the same national recognition as certified organic, there are advantages to being a
small nonprofit organization. It’s easier for them to adapt and change aspects of their certification. For example, consumers and producers insisted on clearer requirement for access to pasture and living conditions for livestock. In response, CNG immediately developed official standards surrounding the well-being of livestock. Eventually the USDA caught up (in 2010) and added regulations clarifying access to pasture.

Michael Noreen is the owner of Burning River Farm, a Certified Naturally Grown farm in Frederic, Wisconsin. He feels CNG provides the best growing and marketing guidelines on a national level for the small-scale farmer who distributes locally.

“The benchmarks for record-keeping, timelines for inspection, fees and structure don’t overburden the small farm,” said Noreen. “Being a small farm owner, I’m the secretary, bookkeeper, boss, laborer, delivery driver, marketing director, and on and on.”

For many, the process to become and maintain organic certification detracts from actual farming operations. Noreen believes CNG is more representative for farmers who are morally invested in maintaining natural growing practices for their operation.

“There is no reason why the food system needs to be led by large entities, either corporate or government, if they are locally based, and if there are people out there willing to take the responsibility of educating themselves.”

**DON’T FORGET THE BEES**

There are certification programs available for produce, livestock and, as of 2010, apiculture. Certified Naturally Grown developed its apiary program in response to beekeepers who were committed to natural practices, but had no way to convey that to customers.

“Nothing really existed,” said Varon. “So we worked with a very experienced beekeeper in North Carolina to develop a set of standards from scratch and outline beekeeping practices that prioritize the health of the honeybees.”

Now about 80 beekeepers nationwide are Certified Naturally Grown. Tanya Phillips, owner and operator of Bee Friendly Austin Apiary, is one of these beekeepers. Phillips and her husband run an apiary in central Texas that became certified in 2013. Organic honey is difficult to verify because bees fly and collect pollen and nectar within a 2 to 3-mile radius from the hive so it’s hard to track what the bees are eating.

“The best we can do is work to prove how we care for our bees and extract our honey,” said Phillips.

It wasn’t hard for the couple to prove their natural practices because they started with new queens and bee packages purchased from a chemical-free breeder. From there, the couple didn’t, and continues not to, use any undesirable pest products on their hives.

“We already knew we didn’t want to use awful chemical treatments on our hives,” said Phillips. “We wanted to stay as natural as possible with the bees and pest management. Because we started with good bee stock in the first place, it makes pest control easy, the bees take care of most if it themselves.”

In order to maintain CNG status they have to keep better written records for their bees than most beekeepers, and that can be time consum-
ing. But in Phillips' opinion it's worth it so people are aware that the honey they sell comes from chemical-free hives, from bees that are protected and cared for.

THE PROCESS
In order to become CNG certified, the farmer or beekeeper must fill out an application specific to their program—these are available online or can be sent via mail. Once approved, the application will be available to the public from the CNG website. This is another important aspect of the CNG program. All of its processes are transparent, and anyone can gain access to records such as inspection reports and applications.

An annual financial contribution is required, but the amount is not set. For livestock and produce certifications the minimum is $110, although between $125 and $200 is recommended. For the apiary CNG certification there is no minimum since the program is newer, but the recommended contribution is between $75 and $200. These can be one-time payments or broken up and paid over time.

There is also a scholarship fund in place to help beginning farmers or those facing unusual hardships. No membership dues need to be paid until after the application is accepted.

Once accepted, members must sign and submit an annual declaration indicating that all of the Certified Naturally Grown standards are met and agreed to. A feed supplier declaration is also required for those pursuing a livestock certification.

Similar to the certified organic label, CNG requires detailed descriptions of the land or operation to be certified as well as a history of substances used within the last three years. There is a list of prohibited and approved substances, methods and ingredients. CNG also has detailed land requirements along with soil fertility and crop nutrient management practice standards. CNG, like other sustainable farming certifications, has
a heavy focus on crop rotation, personal farming goals and biodiversity. Following the paperwork, an on-farm inspection must be arranged within two growing season months of acceptance. Afterward, inspections are held annually, at least once every 16 months. The inspections are free and ideally conducted by other CNG members.

As part of the CNG program, participating farmers and beekeepers are also required to conduct an inspection of another CNG member’s operation if asked. However, this requirement can be waived if there is not another CNG farm or apiary within an hour’s drive.

**PEER EVALUATIONS**

The grassroots program uses a unique farmer-to-farmer inspection approach to verify a producer as CNG. The peer review process means other CNG certified farmers administer the mandatory inspection; if there is not another CNG farmer nearby, a certified organic inspector or farmer can perform the inspection. In lieu of a farmer, a farm can also be inspected by three CSA members. In Varon’s opinion, it gives producers who are certified a sense of ownership and a real commitment to protecting the integrity of the label because they are visiting one another’s farms and ensuring their peers are upholding the program standards.

“People initially think, ‘Well that’s strange, can’t they just give each other a pass?’ But I think quite the opposite effect happens. They feel like they are involved in making sure that this program has meaning. It’s something they’re helping to create and so they really want to protect it. Our challenge is sometimes the peer reviewers are too strict.”

Farmers who are inspecting each other for the CNG label are encouraged to give advice to other farmers, whereas the USDA program forbids inspectors from making suggestions to farmers. The philosophy behind CNG’s peer review system is farmer-inspectors are most familiar with the pest and disease challenges likely faced by other farmers who use natural methods – especially as farmers are often from neighboring farms and deal with similar conditions.

Inspection of Noreen’s farm involved another farmer going through all the aspects of the farm; discussing farming practices, walking through the whole farm, and questioning about problems and solutions and if the inspector deems necessary, he or she will also give recommendations.
for improvements toward sustainability on the farm.

“For example, if I think a farm needs to do more cover cropping and soil building, I put that in the notes and let them know that I see that as something that could use improvement,” said Noreen.

In addition to discussing and improving farming techniques, there is a focus on encouraging one another to evolve in the farming community. Noreen experienced this sense of community firsthand when he received an unexpected phone call. The person calling had recently taken over an apple orchard and needed an inspection to become Certified Naturally Grown.

“The orchard had been previously abandoned, and therefore was past the 36-month period for any chemical applications,” said Noreen. “I did the inspection and ended up getting apples from them for many years for our CSA shares, and we were able to promote each other. Would we have known each other otherwise? It’s questionable.”

The knowledge-sharing aspect is one that CNG prides itself on.

“One of the great benefits is that this is an opportunity for farmers to learn from each other and learn best practices,” said Varon. “They’re constantly striving to improve their operation to do things more efficiently because the margins are so small. It’s a real benefit to be able to have an opportunity to learn a better way of doing things.”

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

In a sea of certifications, it can be challenging for conscientious consumers to know which labels to trust. Certified Organic is the most widely recognized, and most of us have been taught that anything simply labeled “natural” is a marketing ploy. Some farmers have experienced similar skepticism from customers regarding the Certified Naturally Grown label, but the uncertainty is short-lived once questions about CNG ignite a conversation between farmer and consumer.

“For the inquisitive, it gives a bridge to talk about our growing practices and why we choose CNG,” said Noreen. “The customers who
Flair Gardens utilizes its 1-acre space efficiently.

come to the farmers’ market for the first time are skeptical, but that is a great opportunity to talk about growing practices and maybe broaden thinking about where we shop and who we buy from.”

Recently, Flair Gardens, the farm at Florida Air Academy, became Certified Naturally Grown. The 1-acre farm doubles as a classroom at central Florida’s premiere international co-ed boarding school for 6th through 12th graders. Flair Gardens embodies many of CNG’s ideals by providing an opportunity for youth to learn the importance of sustainable farming and accompanying techniques. Kyle Platt, a graduate of the U.C.F. Environmental Science program, is behind the farming initiative at F.A.A.

“The students here at Florida Air Academy not only understand the concepts of ‘farm-to-table’ and ‘organic,’ they are living it each day,” said Platt. “In many cases we are introducing students from across the world to their first taste of organic produce and equipping them with a love of the land and the skills to grow their own food in an organic, all-natural way.”

During the first month of class, F.A.A. students created a budget-friendly, organic composting system that is capable of handling approximately 300 pounds of vegetable scraps generated each week by the dining hall and kitchen. Within six months, Platt believes the composting system will be capable of producing a sustainable supply of naturally produced compost, saving the school thousands of dollars in future operating costs. For Flair Gardens CNG is a milestone in its fledgling career.

There are now over 700 active participants in the Certified Naturally Grown program all over the United States. In the future, CNG hopes to have a greater presence and more participants in all 50 states.

“We are really a network of farmers who produce food for their local communities without synthetic inputs or GMOs,” said Varon. “This is a program for local producers and I think that people really identify that way. It’s not just tapping into some commodity market that the organic program represents but it’s all about farming the way it used to be.”

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