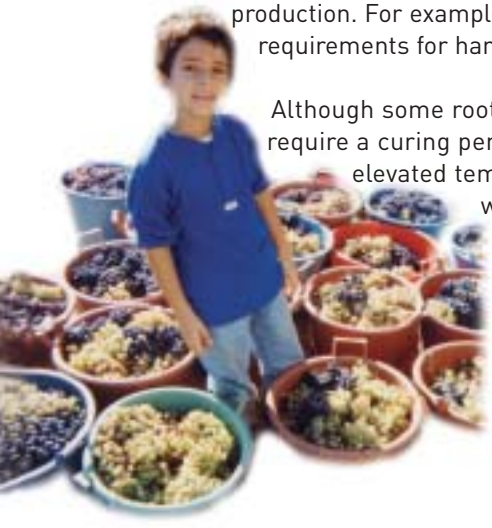
MAINTAINING THE ORGANIC CLAIM THROUGHOUT THE FOOD CHAIN

An organic label on a product represents more than proof of organic production. It shows that the entire food chain – from the farm to the table – adheres to organic standards. For example, processed food may lose its organic claim if it contains ingredients of non-organic origin or if the produce is transported in containers which have chemical residues.

The steady increase in market demand for organic fruits and vegetables in recent years has presented an export opportunity for farmers in developing countries who practice low-input agriculture. However, they must overcome significant hurdles in order to benefit from this opportunity.

Apart from regulations that apply to the production of organic produce, certain post-harvest activities need to be modified to comply with organic regulations. Many post-production operations for organic produce are identical to non-organic production. For example, there are few specific requirements for harvesting organic produce.



Although some root, tuber and bulb crops require a curing period at ambient or elevated temperature to promote wound healing and ensure optimum storage life, there are no specific requirements for curing, storing or transporting organic produce.

Most markets require strict attention to the size, grade, quality and maturity of produce, whether it is organic or not. Fruit and vegetables must be cleaned and graded to comply with these regulations. Although all types of packaging are authorized, there is an expectation that careful thought will go into choosing packaging with regard to its environmental impact. Degradable packaging material is increasingly requested by conscientious consumers.

organic HORTICULTURE and POST-HARVEST operations

Cleaning biodynamic greens

Juice is an ideal product for the organic market. It offers a simple and natural way to process fresh produce, preserves the majority of vitamins and minerals, and largely resolves the problem of storage. Canned produce must be prepared in a way that retains, as closely as possible, the characteristics of fresh produce. Other forms of processing include conservation with sugar which is principally used for fruit jams and purees, and by fermentation which is a chemical change caused by enzymes, bacteria or micro-organisms.

All harvested fruits and vegetables should be placed as soon as possible in a storage area that is kept at the appropriate temperature. However, **organic products need to be stored and transported with proper identification and physically separated from non-organic products.**

Organic cheese making

As for processing, freezing is the only processing method that keeps produce in a state similar to the fresh crop. Organic foods can also be processed by drying; with the use of approved processing aids such as: ascorbic acid, citric acid, tartaric acid and salt; blanching with high temperatures to destroy micro-organisms; pasteurizing to destroy micro-organisms that could contaminate the product after blanching; and with heat treatments that conserve products by destroying or inactivating enzymes and killing micro-organisms.

Organic wheat milling

There are very few approved organic post-harvest treatments for pests and diseases. Hot-water (45-55 °C) immersion, steam and forced hot-air treatments are sometimes used as organic control methods after harvest.

The Post-Harvest Management Group of the FAO Agricultural Support Systems Division has produced guidelines on "Handling and Processing of Organic Fruits and Vegetables in Developing Countries".

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Organic balsamic vinegar barrels

FAO INTER-DEPARTMENTAL WORKING GROUP ON ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

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