

**Organic farming research project report submitted to:**

**Organic Farming Research Foundation  
P.O. Box 440  
Santa Cruz, CA 95061**

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**Project title:** *Increasing Organic Farmer Access to Relevant and Practical Research-Based Information*

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**Project period:** 1999-2001

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## **Summary:**

A series of cutting-edge publications were published on organic-pertinent topics and targeted primarily to experienced organic producers. The series, entitled *Organic Matters*, addressed timely subjects and focused on the presentation of current research. Specific efforts were made to promote these publications, and dissemination was accomplished through the infrastructure of the ATTRA Project.

## **Introduction:**

There is a vast amount of useful and practical research-based information that does not reach organic farmers. Organic and sustainable agriculture research lags well behind other areas of agricultural research in the U.S. This fact was highlighted by the National Organic Research Policy Analysis Project (sponsored by OFRF), which evaluated federally funded research projects for their informational value to organic farming. However, the quantity and quality of research-based information useful for organic farming has still expanded enormously since the early 1980s. Increased interest in sustainability, a growing public awareness of environmental issues, a growing market for organic products, and the implementation of federal organic regulations are among the factors supporting the growth in research.

Unfortunately, much of the information generated by this research is slow in reaching organic farmers. Some does not reach them at all. Farmers generally lack the time and financial resources needed to sift through the large volume of agricultural literature now being generated. Some also lack the interpretive skills required to understand the more technical reports.

## **Objectives:**

The principal objective of this project was to make a greater proportion of relevant and practical research-based information available to organic farmers. Experienced organic farmers were specifically targeted. In the original proposal, NCAT planned to create a quarterly publication featuring abstracts of relevant research gleaned from the literature. Emphasis was to be placed on recent, cutting-edge research on a broad range of topics pertinent to organic production and marketing. NCAT would use the infrastructure of the ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas) Project to promote and distribute the quarterly to farmers, researchers, Extension agents, and others.

One hoped-for result of this effort was that the quarterly would continue to be published beyond the funded project year. However, it was determined early on that this was not likely to occur. Therefore, we obtained approval to change the delivery mechanism to a publication series titled *Organic Matters*. The series would focus on providing concise and readable interpretive summaries of organic-pertinent research as originally proposed. However, each publication would be targeted to a specific topic rather than being broad-based. Breadth would be sacrificed for depth, as each publication would explore a specific subject much more thoroughly. The series would be continued into the future as an ongoing publication category within the ATTRA Project. As designed, it would encourage specialists to tackle high-need and timely organic topic areas to a degree not customary in traditional ATTRA publications. Furthermore, the more thorough exploration of specific topics was believed to be more useful to farmers in a position to use some of the more advanced information provided.

Another hope we had for this project was that it would make the ATTRA Project more proactive in development and dissemination of information. Throughout most of its fifteen years of service, ATTRA has sought to provide its clientele with information that was as current and relevant as possible. However, the approach has been largely a reactive one—farmers call ATTRA with questions and technical staff provide a response. When a subject area generates enough inquiries, a publication is often developed with periodic updating. Clients, therefore, are unlikely to learn first of cutting edge information from ATTRA; typically they first hear of it elsewhere. It is later that they call ATTRA for further details and perspective. ATTRA typically does not publish on the new topic until some time passes.

Through the *Organic Matters* series, the ATTRA specialists acquired a vehicle for becoming more proactive. *Organic Matters* publications try to anticipate the informational needs of the organic community and provide cutting-edge details and perspectives when innovative producers can make optimum use of them.

### **Process:**

In order for Project objectives to be met, the *Organic Matters* publications needed to distinguish themselves from other publications produced by ATTRA and by other information multipliers serving the organic community. This entailed focusing on three specific elements: 1) identifying appropriate topics; 2) finding and summarizing the most pertinent and cutting edge research; and 3) structuring the presentation in a unique but readable manner.

***Identifying Topics.*** While there is little enough good organic information available on almost any topic, some areas are more lacking than others. Among the four topic areas chosen to begin the *Organic Matters* series, organic production of tree fruit and hogs were chosen due to the significant gaps in information that existed. In the matter of tree fruits, the gaps related mostly to regional issues; in hogs, the gaps existed on virtually all levels.

The topics of the remaining two publications were chosen for a somewhat different reason. The subjects of conservation tillage and water quality were chosen because these issues currently command much interest in public debates about agriculture in general, and because the role and relationship of organic farming to these matters is poorly understood.

***Finding and Summarizing Research.*** NCAT agriculture specialists are in an exceptionally good position to find and identify pertinent research, as this is a routine activity in the ATTRA Project. The in-house resource center receives and archives more than 570 periodicals—including professional journals, trade magazines, and newsletters. Specialists systematically review this vast amount of agricultural literature—organic, alternative, and conventional—on a routine basis. This is in addition to monitoring information on the World Wide Web and electronic listservs. Furthermore, NCAT enjoys access to the University of Arkansas library and its resources. Technical staff are quick to identify appropriate articles and reports and to set them aside for further analysis and summarization.

As with the gathering of information, the analysis and summarizing required by this Project were also skills common to NCAT staff; analysis and summary are largely what ATTRA's technical specialists do. However, as mentioned earlier, they have done this work largely in response to an expressed need, rather than in anticipation of it.

**Structure of Presentation.** The structure of the *Organic Matters* publications grew from the original proposal, which promised the delivery of concise and readable abstracts of relevant and pertinent research. Each document featured two main sections. The first section was an overall discussion of the topic area. The second section presented a selection of research abstracts. The abstracts explained the research results and related those findings to the previous discussion. In the majority of instances, the abstracted research was from recently published journals and other sources, though older research was also used where appropriate.

**Review Process.** *Organic Matters* publications were submitted to the same internal technical and editorial review process accorded ATTRA publications. In most instances, external technical reviews were also sought.

### **Products & Dissemination:**

**Products.** As of the May 2002, four *Organic Matters* publications have been completed:

- *Pursuing Conservation Tillage Systems for Organic Crop Production* by George Kuepper, published June 2001. This publication can be viewed at <<http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/PDF/omconservtill.pdf>>.
- *Considerations in Organic Apple Production* by Guy Ames, published July 2001. This publication can be viewed at <<http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/PDF/omapple.pdf>>.
- *Considerations in Organic Hog Production* by Lance Gegner, published July 2001. This publication can be viewed at <<http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/PDF/omhog.pdf>>.
- *Organic Farming and Water Quality* by Barbara Bellows. Final draft has been reviewed. Publication expected by July 2002.

**Promotion.** ATTRA publications are typically promoted through the *ATTRA Publications List*—a document that is regularly updated, by announcement on various listservs such as the Sustainable Agriculture Network, and through publicity pieces in ATTRA's newsletter, the *ATTRAnews*. (The *Organic Matters* series and the three completed publications were profiled in the Summer 2001 issue.)

Additional efforts were made to promote the *Organic Matters* series. In September and October 2001, direct mailings of the three completed *Organic Matters* publications were made to 49 Organic and sustainable agriculture organizations and editorial offices. The mailing was accompanied by a letter announcing ATTRA's increased focus on organic agriculture; it encouraged the recipients to so-inform their subscribers and clientele and specifically to mention *Organic Matters*. Additional mailings were also made to all State Extension Sustainable Agriculture Coordinators, with a similar message.

**Dissemination.** ATTRA publications are disseminated primarily through two means, mailed hardcopies and web publishing. Mailed hardcopies in 2001 totaled 219, 214, and 208, respectively, for *Pursuing Conservation Tillage...*, *Organic Apples...*, and *Organic Hogs...* Statistics on publication mailings for early 2002 are not available at the time of this writing.

Web hits for the first three *Organic Matters* publications are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Web Hits Recorded Monthly on *Organic Matters* Publications**

Month/Year	Org. Cons. Tillage	Organic Apples	Organic Hogs
August 2001	249	135	46
September 2001	237	225	139
October 2001	402	346	389
November 2001	285	283	509
December 2001	312	471	541
January 2002	476	595	606
February 2002	587	515	310
March 2002	756	886	460
April 2002	593	724	579

### **Future Projections and Developments:**

The four existing *Organic Matters* publications will continue to be published and distributed by ATTRA for the foreseeable future. New publications in the series are currently under development. The two that have been announced are *Organic Herb Production* and *Organic Mulching Systems for Organic Market Gardeners* (note that these are “working titles”). Publication of both documents is expected before the end of 2002.

### **Summary & Discussion**

To date this project has succeeded in delivering four publications on current topics in organic agriculture. All meet the criteria of timeliness and current research set forth in our original proposal. There are at least two more publications in draft and others under discussion, indicating success in our objective to create an on-going, more proactive vehicle for the ATTRA project to use in reaching the agricultural community.

The continued demand for these publications is viewed as an indicator of success in both outreach and in selection of topics. While more feedback from clientele is needed, the comments received to date indicate a positive response to the content and presentation of the information.

While not clearly articulated in the original proposal, another objective of this project was to focus more of NCAT’s energy on service to the organic community. While the ATTRA project has long provided good information to organic farmers, there had been no further efforts to specifically target their needs or the needs of those who work with organic producers. The *Organic Matters* project was the first step towards changing that. NCAT currently has an additional four active organic projects, plus additional proposals under development. We are also involved in other organic initiatives such as SCOAR, and several staff assist OMRI in its work. We are most pleased with the outcomes of the *Organic Matters* project and want to express our thanks to the primary funder, the Organic Farming Research Foundation, and the two organizations that provided matching funding, the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service and the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture.