

Organic Farming Research Foundation Final Report
Educating women farmers about certified organic production
Melissa Matthewson, OSU Extension

Organic farming farmer education project report submitted to:

**Organic Farming Research Foundation
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Project title: *Educating women farmers about certified organic production*

Principal investigator:

Melissa Matthewson
Small Farms Instructor
Oregon State University Extension
Southern Oregon Research & Extension Center
569 Hanley Road
Central Point, OR 97502
541-776-7371 x208
melissa.matthewson@oregonstate.edu

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Project Summary

The purpose of this project was to educate women farmers about certified organic production principles. OSU Extension Small Farms held four on-farm field days on various topics related to organic production including soil fertility, organic certification, organic livestock production, organic seed production, organic marketing and season extension. 80 women farmers attended the four field days that were held on three certified organic farms and one transitioning farm. Each farm day began with a farm tour by the woman organic producer followed by presentations by agricultural professionals and discussions about various topics. This project furthered the widespread adoption of organic farming practices through experiential, hands-on education about organic farming production principles and the challenges to achieving organic certification in southwestern Oregon.

Introduction to Topic

There were several organic farming issues addressed by this project. Sourcing quality certified organic hay and organic feed is a top issue for organic livestock producers and a major barrier to certification in the southwestern Oregon region. This topic was covered in detail at the on-farm organic livestock production field day. Many of the other topics addressed by the field days have been mentioned by farmers in our *League of Women Farmers* group as issues or interests of concern. Many of the women farmers have mentioned needing education on organic pricing for economic success and viability as well as education on the benefits of organic marketing. As well, the women farmers attending the field days were new to farming and needed education on the ins and outs of certifying organic. Organic soil fertility is a very important topic as many of the women farmers are implementing market gardens and need information on improving organic soils. A field day addressing crop rotation, cover cropping, organic matter residue management, organic certification, organic fertilizers and inputs was a major benefit to these women producers. As well, organic seed production is becoming a viable production alternative in southwestern Oregon, so learning the basics of producing organic seed as well as continuing the conversation about barriers and successes in organic seed production was of value to the women farmers. Season extension is also critical to organic production and success on a small scale, but many women do not know the various season extension opportunities available to them. This project was developed after spending months with the *League of Women Farmers* and listening to the issues they were having on their farms as well as documenting what educational resources they needed.

Objectives Statement

Objective 1: Develop networking opportunities and new relationships between certified organic small-scale women farmers and other women farmers who would like to certify organic in southwestern Oregon.

Outcome 1: New relationships were developed, mentoring opportunities were cultivated and information exchanged between women farmers about organic production principles and certification.

Objective 2: Educate local women farmers about organic production principles related to various production systems including flowers, mixed vegetables, poultry, livestock production and organic seed.

Outcome 2: Local women farmers became better educated about how to produce and design organic production systems that can lead them successfully to organic certification.

Objective 3: Brainstorm challenges to certifying organic for local farms.

Outcome 3: Problems related to certification were addressed and solutions for overcoming certification and organic challenges were identified.

Materials and Methods

Our intended audience for this project was women farmers who were interested in certifying organic or those already certified who wanted more information related to topics. We assessed the participants' understanding of the subject matter through hand-written evaluations at the end of each field day. Survey data were compiled and analyzed using Excel. Most results are presented as descriptive statistics with some qualitative data gathered from the participants. Qualitative data assisted with placing the other data in context.

The end goal of the project was to educate women farmers about certified organic production principles on-farm and to facilitate new relationships and discussion related to organic production. This was our first attempt at presenting information on the farm and it was extremely successful. We kept the participation to 20 commercial women farmers and held many presentations and discussions in barns, homes and in the field. This gave the field days a certain intimacy and allowed for plenty of time for questions, discussion and feedback. As well, many of the women farmers involved in the League of Women Farmers wanted to understand and learn more about certified organic production and whether it was a right choice for them on the farm. The field days enabled them to make better decisions about their farms. We also experimented for the first time with video by capturing much of the field day tours and presentations on a digital camera. We would like to make that video available online once it has been edited.

The four host farms assisted in developing the agendas for each of the four field days. They reviewed the topics and gave feedback to those topics. This was the first step in developing the field days. Once we set dates and topics for the field days, we identified key professionals who could attend the field days and give professional presentations. From there, we began outreach for the field days through our small farms network. It was not difficult to fill the twenty spots at

each field day and often, the field days were full with a waiting list a couple of weeks before the event. Primary outreach was accomplished through emails and word-of-mouth. Once we contacted speakers and specialists we organized materials for each field day, which included four books and a number of presenter handouts and power points. Then, it was just a matter of holding each field day and working with speakers to refine their topics and presentations.

Project Results

The participants of the field day ranged in enterprise and acreage. It was a diverse group of women farmers which included those just starting out to those who were running commercial farms. Some were considering organic certification and some were already certified. Most of the women producers were small-scale with under 20 acres in production and a range of crops and livestock represented including pears, asparagus, hay, cattle, pumpkins, alpacas, berries, vegetables, perennials, flowers, pigs, dairy goats, laying hens and broilers, beef cattle, grain, and apples.

On a five-point scale (5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest), the overall average rating of all the field days was 4.7. As well, participants reported that the field days adequately helped them make a decision regarding organic certification (average 3.58 out of 5). In reference to Outcome 1, on a five-point scale, the field days introduced the women to a new community of farmers and encouraged new networking and relationships as well as shared information exchange (average 4.28 out of 5). Participants reported that they would highly recommend the organic field days series to other women farmers (average 4.97 out of 5).

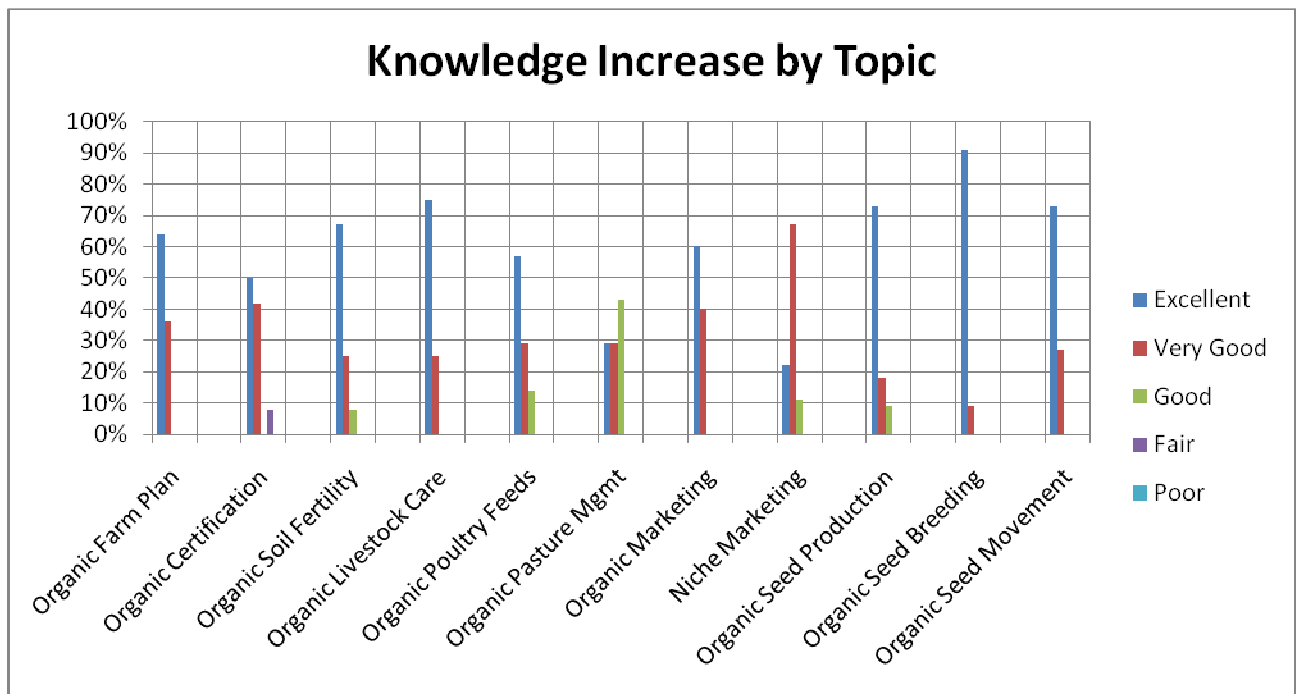


Figure 1

Figure 1 above shows the percentages of reporting participants whose understanding or knowledge of a particular topic was significantly increased. These data were based on a five-point scale. For example, 64% of reporting participants said they had an excellent understanding of the organic farm plan whereas 36% of reporting participants said they had a very good understanding. Following the evaluations and the data show in Figure 1, much of the educational value and knowledge learned came from the following topics: organic seed breeding, organic livestock care, organic seed production & movement and organic soil fertility. For example, 91% of reporting participants had an excellent understanding and increase in knowledge of organic seed breeding after the field day. 75% of reporting participants had an excellent knowledge gain in organic livestock care. As well, participants reported wanting more education about these topics at the end of the field days.

There were many interesting stories and comments related to objectives and outcomes that came out of our evaluation of the field days.

Some of these are as follows:

“I learned a lot from the class [organic soil fertility & certification]. I have already adjusted some of my land practices and have shared the information from the class about certification with others in my community. Reaching out to women farmers was wonderful. I think that many women are intimidated by the more technical aspects of farming. Offering a class to women created a collaborative and supportive learning and networking environment and the focus on organic certification brought women of varied ages and farm types who are ready for the next step. I feel very supported as I move forward in the next steps with my farm and for me; this support helps me to ensure that our endeavor will be successful.”

“Love LOWF farm days! A great way to meet folks, network & get inspired.”

“Organic is the way of the future in southern Oregon. OSU can remain on the cutting edge with the small farms program by offering workshops like this series, which have been excellent. Bringing women up to speed on organic certification practices and philosophy speeds up the economy booster for southern Oregon...The resources provided were excellent and have benefited not just me but the development of our small farm. I have already shared some of the materials with my neighbors who have a small farm...”

“I rated the day [organic seed production] and the presenters high because my overall experience was very positive. I left inspired and excited to be part of the movement and community...the day was pretty productive and full.”

Conclusions and Discussion

One word about the project: success! The on-farm field days were well-attended with waiting lists. We reached a total of 80 women farmers throughout the course of the summer growing season through the on-farm field days. Based on evaluation data and qualitative data from participants as well as faculty and staff feedback, the project was extremely useful to participants and provided valuable information about certified organic production to a new audience. The project was so successful (especially in terms of designing on-farm education programs) that many of our Extension programs are now based on this model: on-farm educational days with farm tours and presentations by professionals and other farmers. I think this model of organic production education can be replicated in many other regions to expand the knowledge to other organic farmers. Offering the proceedings and information on the web will also help to spread the information and make it useful to new audiences.

The only problems we encountered with the project were not having enough space to accommodate all those that wanted to attend the field days. We limited participation to 20 commercial women farmers and many times there were waiting lists for the particular day, highlighting the need for this type of education. As well, some of the days seemed rushed and it almost seems like we could have had eight field days instead of four. We needed more time to cover topics adequately and in-depth. Having an adequate budget to attract high quality speakers and farmers was an important part of this project and led to its success. As well, compensating the organic farmers sufficiently for hosting was also a huge benefit to this project. Based on what we learned from this project, I think there is even more need for organic livestock health care education as well as organic soil fertility management (with a heavy emphasis on crop rotation and animal manures). Many evaluations also mentioned the need for more education on marketing in general, not necessarily related to organic production. There was also more interest in providing hands-on education for organic farmers in seed production, equipment, harvesting, and weed control. At the organic livestock day, there were two solutions-oriented discussions related to poultry nutrition and hay. Many of the participants thought it would be useful to start a poultry nutrition group that could discuss organic poultry feed related to nutrition. Another idea resulting from discussions included putting together a sourcing list of places to find quality, organic hay for organic livestock operations.

Outreach

The OSU Extension Small Farms Program has an extensive email list of small farmers in the southwestern Oregon region. We also have an extensive email list of women producers involved in our League of Women Farmers. These were our primary distribution outlets for promotion and outreach of this project. We also posted the field day information on our local OSU Extension website as well as put listings for the field days in our Extension catalog. This allowed us to fill the field days very quickly.

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The project director, Melissa Matthewson, gave two presentations on the League of Women Farmers and included information about the OFRF-funded field days at each of those presentations. The first presentation was at the National Small Farms Conference in Springfield, Illinois in September of 2009 and the second presentation was at the WSU Mount Vernon Research & Extension Center in December 2009. Both presentations included information about the grant-funded project as well as showed pictures from many of the field days. We also showed video footage from the various field days at both of these presentations.

PowerPoint proceedings, this final report, and photos will be available on the OSU Extension SOREC website and as well as the eOrganic and OrganicAgInfo websites.

References for Designing, Planning & Implementing Project

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Heuser, G.F. (1955). *Feeding Poultry: The Classic Guide to Poultry Nutrition*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

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Ashworth, Suzanne. (2002). *Seed to Seed: Seeding Saving & Growing Techniques for Vegetable Gardeners*. Iowa: Seed Savers Exchange.

Addenda

- I. Photographs from on-farm field days
- II. Detailed agendas with speakers & topics for each field day
- III. PowerPoint presentations and other materials from Ag professionals from field days
- IV. PowerPoint from professional presentations in IL and WA