The Organic Sprout

THE ORGANIC SEED SEARCH
By Jacomijn Schravesande-Gardei, Associate Director of Crops

One of the most frequently cited rules in crop scope inspection review letters is about organic seeds and, more specifically, a producer’s lack of organic seed search records and their decision to not use organic seeds when organic seeds are available. The National Organic Program (NOP) rule states “the producer must use organically grown seeds, annual seedlings, and planting stock; except non-organically produced untreated seeds and planting stock may be used to produce an organic crop when the equivalent organically produced variety is not commercially available.” The MOFGA Certification Services (MCS) practice manual states the following regarding the organic seed search: “You must conduct a reasonable search for organic seed. This means contacting at least three seed companies likely to carry organic seed and doing so during the time of year when there is likely to be inventory in stock. Keep records of your efforts. Examples of records include: lists showing which seed companies were researched for organic seed before purchasing conventional seeds, printing dated inventory announcements or email correspondences with companies. Cost cannot be a factor when determining commercial availability.”

Exceptions to the use of organic seeds
There are only three exceptions to the rule stipulating the use of organic seeds:

First, the equivalent variety. The variety refers not to generic broccoli, but to a specific variety of broccoli you might use. If you have been using a variety that is unavailable in certified organic seed, or you choose to use a variety that has properties that fit your growing situation but is unavailable as organic seed, then non-organic seed may be used.

Second, there is a lack of commercial availability. If the organic seed variety you want is only available in a small quantity and you require a larger amount than is “commercially available” you may purchase non-organic, untreated seed.

Third, if you feel that the quality (let’s say germination or vigor) of an organic seed variety is inferior to the conventional seeds available for that variety then you may use non-organic, untreated seeds.

Sources of organic seeds
Please note that the practice manual states that at least three seed companies need to be searched as sources for organic seed. MOFGA has a handy resource on its website listing seed companies that sell organic seeds. It can be found here: mofga.org/resources/uncategorized/organic-seed-sources. Organic seed search engines (such as paorganic.org/resources/organic-seed-finder) and Google can also help you in your search.

Organic seed search records
A lot of growers use spreadsheets to track search records. They add the seed companies they searched for organic varieties and the seeds they had to source conventionally, printing dated inventory announcements or email correspondences with companies. Cost cannot be a factor when determining commercial availability.

For more information, please see: seedalliance.org/publications/organic-seed-search-annotated-resources-guide.