



This data brief summarizes findings from Organic Seed Alliance's (OSA) most recent State of Organic Seed report as they relate to the role of organic seed producers/companies, including trends in organic seed sourcing, the enforcement of the organic seed regulation, and recommendations for encouraging the expansion of organic seed systems.

Overview

Organic seed represents the first link in the organic supply chain, serving as the foundation of organic integrity from seed to plate. *State of Organic Seed* is an ongoing project that monitors organic seed systems in the U.S. Every five years, OSA releases this progress report and action plan for increasing the organic seed supply while fostering seed grower networks and policies that aim to decentralize power and ownership in seed systems.

OSA's research provides evidence that organic seed sourcing is increasing among smaller vegetable producers but that progress toward 100 percent organic seed usage in all crop types remains stagnant. In other words, our newest data shows no meaningful improvement in organic producers using more organic seed compared to five years ago. Certified organic growers are required to source organic seed when commercially available, but our findings show that most organic growers still plant non-organic seed for at least part (if not all) of their operations. **In other words, our data shows no meaningful improvement in organic producers using more organic seed compared to five years ago.**

By the very nature of their work, seed growers continue the time-honored practice of keeping our seeds alive and adapting to changing environmental conditions and needs. The challenges posed by climate change and seed-industry consolidation underscore the importance of centering seed growers in strategies that enhance the resiliency and sustainability of our food and farming systems. **However, fewer organic producers report saving their own seed or producing seed on their farm compared to five years ago (a decrease from 42.7% of producers responding to our survey in 2016 to 25.4% in 2022).**

Targeted investments of time, resources, research, and shared learning are needed to support growers interested in producing seed or expanding their seed enterprises. Only 5 percent of organic research funding went toward organic seed production research and education, yet nearly 40 percent of organic farmers who responded to our national survey say they're interested in producing seed commercially.

Key findings

New to the State of Organic Seed project is a deeper examination of seed producer/company experiences and research needs, in addition to an analysis of their networks. **In 2021, we conducted a survey and interviews with certified organic seed producers/companies to better understand their challenges. Below are key findings from this data:**

- **Seed producers face several production and non-production challenges.** The production challenges reported include estimating and achieving seed yields; controlling weed, pest, and disease pressure; and managing climatic effects. Outside of field production, managing business activities and finding markets, developing infrastructure, and finding and retaining skilled labor all rank high on the list of challenges.
- **Climate change is severely impacting organic seed growers.** Numerous growers reported extreme weather events and unpredictable changes in their climate as a serious challenge. Policy actions and research investments are needed to mitigate the impacts and increase the climate robustness of our crops and seed systems.
- **GMO contamination remains a concern of organic producers and organic seed companies.** Maintaining high genetic integrity of organic/non-GMO seed used in organic farming is important to organic producers and seed producers/companies, but organic policy solutions are difficult to identify. True “coexistence” is only possible when manufacturers and users of GMO crops share the responsibility for preventing contamination of organic and other non-GE seed.
- **Organic seed producers/companies and organic researchers view utility patents on seed as the most harmful form of intellectual property right (IPR) associated with seed.** They also viewed the Open Source Seed Initiative (OSSI) pledge as most helpful.
- **A major gap in data and resources is a reliable, national database of all commercially available organic varieties.** A more robust organic seed database would support organic seed sourcing and enforcement of the organic seed requirement, which would support organic seed companies. The database could also serve as a market assessment of commercial availability.
- **Organic seed producers identified common elements when asked to envision a resilient seed system.** Seed producers would like to see decentralized regional communities of seed growers that can work together to share knowledge, access markets, and maintain diverse, productive, and adapted seed.
- **The current structure of organic seed networks across the US mostly reflects a resilient seed system.** However, regions other than the West are still small and developing, and resources along the supply chain could stand to be diversified.
- **All organic seed networks rely on the National Plant Germplasm System.** Organic seed producers/companies access these public seed collections for purposes of breeding, adaptation, and seed production, underscoring the importance of ensuring adequate funding, access, and accountability within this system.

Recommendations

A longer list of recommendations can be found in the conclusion of the report. We hope these recommendations will serve as an action plan for increasing the organic seed supply while fostering seed-grower networks and policies that aim to decentralize power and ownership in seed systems. The recommendations that stand out as most timely include:

- The organic seed regulation should be strengthened and consistently enforced, regardless of farm size, and buyers/processors who contract with organic producers to use specific varieties should be held accountable to the organic seed regulation. Stronger enforcement will spur more commitment and investments in organic seed production and as a result expand organic seed availability.
- Public research investments in organic plant breeding and organic seed initiatives should continue to increase and research agendas should be diversified to prioritize the seed-producer challenges identified above.
- More organic seed trainings are needed to accommodate the interest, and address the challenges, among organic producers to ensure that organic seed production capacity continues to grow in the US.
- Improve existing databases, or develop a new database, that reliably includes all commercially available organic seed to support producers with their sourcing.
- The National Plant Germplasm System should ensure that funding for germplasm collections increases for the benefit of the public good.

