

Study: need growth in organics

By JENNIFER VINCENT

WHEN it comes to producing organic foods, particularly fruits and vegetables, Michigan is way behind the curve — and there is no good reason for that, according to Jim Bingen, Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station researcher and the lead author on a recent, first-of-its-kind, statewide, comprehensive status report on organic agriculture.

"We are the second most agricultur-

Key Points

- State has 205 certified organic farmers and 56 certified organic processors.
- Survey findings show more opportunity exists for Michigan-grown organic foods.
- Organic foods have potential beyond direct marketing.

ally diverse state in the country behind California, yet we are nowhere near where they are in terms of producing and marketing organic foods," Bingen

says. "There is tremendous opportunity for Michigan growers, and this report provides us with the critical information we need to support the growth and diversification of Michigan organic production and marketing."

"Organic Agriculture in Michigan: 2006 Survey Report" is part of a collaborative project by Michigan State University and the Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance, or MOFFA.

Consumer interest has soared in organic foods, particularly fruits and

Certified organic?

Certified Organic" means the item has been grown according to strict uniform standards that are verified by independent state or private organizations. Certification includes inspections of farm fields and processing facilities, detailed record-keeping, and periodic testing of soil and water to ensure that growers and handlers are meeting the standards that have been set.

vegetables. Yet, most all of the organic produce in Michigan grocery stores is coming from national or international organic suppliers, Bingen notes.

Growers need more help

To assist growers, the report recommends conducting a biennial census of organic agriculture to assess organic farm progress, investigating barriers to certification for Michigan farmers who follow organic practices, researching soil fertility management strategies specific to organic farms, advocating for policies and programs to support the organic community, and promoting the economic and environmental benefits of organic farming in Michigan.

As of 2005, Michigan has 205 certified organic farmers and 56 certified organic processors or handlers. The 45,500 certified organic acres comprise 0.4% of the state's total farmland. Eighty percent of Michigan's certified organic cropland is in beans and grains; 2% is in vegetables; and 3% is in fruit.

In the U.S., Michigan ranks first in the number of organic spelt acres, second in organic beans and eighth in organic fruit. According to a recent USDA survey, the number of certified organic acres in the United States grew by 63% from 1997 to 2005; Michigan certified organic farmland increased by 166% over the same period. That growth is largely due to organic bean acreage doubling and organic grains tripling.

More than direct market

"Organic agriculture in Michigan really looks different than out West," Bingen says. "There is this notion that raising organic fruits and vegetables means that you must be engaged in direct marketing."

In Michigan, most of the conventional fruit and vegetable production goes to processing. "For some producers, to think of moving from traditional ag to organic means moving from processing market to fresh market. But, that's not their only option, there are processing markets for organic — for example Gerber's organic line processed in Fremont."

The report is a building block for creating a comprehensive organic food system that connects organic farmers with Michigan consumers, as well processors and marketing arms.

Bingen says he will introduce growers to the survey findings, opportunities and a round-table discussion at this year's Great Lakes Fruit and Vegetable Expo in December.

A copy of the 34-page report is available as a PDF document at www.moffa.org. For more information, contact Bingen at bingen@msu.edu or 517-353-1905.

■ August's *Michigan Farmer* will feature more on organic agriculture.



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