



MAINTAINING ORGANIC INTEGRITY AT RETAIL



Introduction

Retailers play a critical role in linking producers and processors, and their products, to consumers. Retailers are also key to increasing accessibility of organic foods for consumers, for which the organic community is greatly appreciative.

In order to ensure that an organic product sold at retail is indeed still organic when a customer buys it, retailers have a responsibility to maintain its **organic integrity** – that is, the organic quality of the product that makes it different from non-organic food (for example, the organic product must not come in direct contact with synthetic chemicals that are prohibited in organic production).

Maintaining organic integrity at retail is important because:

- ✓ British Columbia's and Canada's organic regulations require that the organic integrity of a product is not compromised in any stage of preparation or handling, which includes storing, grading, packing, shipping, marketing and labelling. (See end of document for information on the British Columbia Certified Organic program and the Canada Organic Regime)
- ✓ It strengthens customer confidence in the retailers' practices and the organic label.

Some retailers voluntarily choose to certify their repacking and labelling activities, but it is not necessary to be a certified organic retailer to sell organic products, unless these products are then shipped to other locations outside the province, or they would like to use the Canada Organic logo. However voluntary retailer certification does function to increase consumer trust and awareness, and extends the hard work farmers and processors put into organic certification to the store.

Note: *The information contained in this document is based on the Canada Organic Trade Association's Canadian Organic Retailing Practices (CORP) Manual and Guide, and ACORN's Organic 101 workshop for retailers. The CORP is the main resource for in-depth information and guidance. Additional resources are provided at the end of this document.*

Three Key Principles Of Organic integrity:

There are three basic principles that must be followed to make sure a product remains organic. An organic product must avoid being “commingled” or “contaminated” with non-organic product, and documentation should be accessible to provide evidence of this.

Commingling occurs when an organic product is mixed up with a non-organic product (such as fruit on display or bulk nuts), often resulting in a non-organic product being sold as organic.

Contamination occurs when an organic product is exposed to prohibited substance, including cleaning products or pest control substances not permitted by the organic standards.

Record keeping is essential to document field to fork activities, whether it’s a certified organic farmer, processor, or a retailer selling organic products. Record keeping can be quite simple, but is critical to ensure traceability and confidence that organic integrity has been maintained. The most essential records for retailers are organic certificates for incoming products (or ensure the distributor has them), sanitation logs and pest control logs to document that there were no contamination threats to organic products.

To ensure organic integrity, it’s best to:

Keep it simple – keep it separate!

Cleaning and Maintenance

- Some of the cleaners used under a regular sanitation protocol may not be appropriate for organic products. Retailers should have a clear policy and list of cleaners and sanitizers that are approved for use with organic products, and in storage, display, or preparation areas. It is helpful to have these colour-coded or distinctly labelled for easy identification.
- Use sanitation logs to ensure that staff is following the policy. These are important records that demonstrate organic integrity if it is ever questioned.
- Store cleaning products away from food storage or preparation areas to avoid contamination accidents.
- Enforce a pest control regime that is well monitored, emphasizes prevention, and uses mechanical traps. If infestations do occur, be sure organic product and packaging are not exposed to inappropriate materials.

Receiving

It is important to confirm the organic status of incoming goods.

- Upon delivery, verify that each case is clearly marked as organic.
- Inspect the delivery truck and packaging for any contamination concerns and set aside any questionable product until it can be verified.

Storage

Every store will have an established storage system, ideally one that segregates organic and non-organic storage areas with clear labelling. Other good storage tips include:

- Consider placing organic product above non-organic product to prevent prohibited substances on the non-organic product from dripping on the organic product.
- Ensure all open bags and containers are closed for the same reasons noted above.
- Do not guess the status of unmarked product. If product is unmarked or not labelled, it is not organic.

Preparation

"Preparation" refers to any product transformation from receipt to sale, including reconditioning fresh produce (e.g. crisping lettuce).

- To prevent commingling, consider having a separate organic preparation area and dedicated utensils. If space is limited, consider colour coding separate utensils and doing all organic preparation first thing after the preparation area has been thoroughly cleaned.
- If washing/chilling produce, do not use the same water as that used for non-organic produce to avoid residue contamination. Be aware that chlorine levels in contact with organic food cannot exceed those of drinking water.

Packaging

- Only use new or recycled packaging from organic products to package or store organic goods. Be sure to remove or cover organic logos and certification identification information that doesn't pertain to the repackaged product.
- If using new packaging materials, make sure they are fumigant and dye free.

Display

Retail displays can present commingling and contamination risks to organic integrity.

- Consider presenting or packaging organic products differently from non-organic products that are alike. For example, sell non-organic button mushrooms in bulk and organic button mushrooms in clamshells.
- Unpackaged organic product (e.g. bulk produce or meat in a deli case) should never touch non-organic product. Displaying organic product above non-organic product will avoid any dripping resulting in contamination.
- A consistent colour-coding scheme for display signs that differentiates organic products from non-organic helps customers identify organic products.

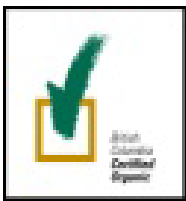
Labelling

Many organic products will already have labels, but some (mostly fresh products) may not. Here is some guidance to provide customers with the most accurate information:

- Do not use "organic" or any of its derivatives (i.e., "organically grown") on any product that isn't certified organic.
- If a product makes a 70-95% ingredient claim, do not label it as "organic" or use any of derivatives of the word "organic".
- Retailers may wish to label some products as "transitional" if a supplier has the relevant certificate from an organic certifier to prove it. It is okay to use this term to educate customers about what it means, but the product cannot be described or labelled as "organic".
- To label food prepared in-store, consult the Canadian Organic Retail Practices manual and guide to ensure these labels are created properly.

British Columbia Certified Organic Program

The British Columbia Certified Organic Program (BCCOP) is a voluntary agri-food quality program sanctioned by the Government of British Columbia through the Organic Agricultural Products Certification Regulation under the [Agri-Food Choice and Quality Act](#). The BCCOP was launched in 1993.



The 'Checkmark' logo is the official mark / symbol of the BCCOP. It, along with the phrase 'British Columbia Certified Organic', can be used to identify items produced in BC that contain >95% certified organic ingredients, and are certified by COABC [accredited certification bodies](#).

Canada Organic Regime



The [Canada Organic Regime](#) (COR) is Canada's national regulated system for organic agricultural products, developed in collaboration with the government and the organic sector. The [Organic Products Regulations](#) came into effect on June 30, 2009.

Operators who are ISO certified may use the Canada Organic Regime logo on products with >95% organic content. Three COABC accredited certification bodies deliver ISO certification under the COR.

All organic products certified under the BC Certified Organic Program (BCCOP) are produced according to the [Canadian Organic Standards](#) and [Permitted Substances Lists](#), which COABC adopted in 2009. COABC has its own [Organic Management Standards manual](#) which contains additional guidance on the certification process under the BCCOP.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO PROGRAMS & LOGOS? In terms of organic production and processing standards, and organic product integrity – absolutely nothing! Both logos mean that the product was produced according to the same organic standards, and was inspected and certified by a certifying body under government regulation. Consumers can be assured of the organic integrity of products bearing either one or both of these logos – absolutely no Question about it!