



ORGANIC FARMERS  
ASSOCIATION

# Experiences in Organic Transition: Organic Curious to Almost Certified

*By Julia Barton*



Transitioning to organic farming is more than just a shift in practices; it's a profound commitment that demands a significant investment of time, energy, and resources. Organic-minded farmers—whether they're just exploring the idea of transitioning, in the midst of converting their land, or already certified and looking to expand—face a complex web of decisions. They must weigh options regarding crop rotations, market opportunities, health impacts, inputs, and labor variables, all while crafting a sustainable path forward.

The transition process can be daunting, but by drawing on the experiences of those who have already navigated this journey, such as the farmers we'll meet here, farmers can find valuable insights and reassurance. The organic community is unique in how it shares experiences, and through these shared stories the intimidating leap toward and through organic transition can become an informed step toward a thriving future.

Let's hear the experiences of farmers whose transition journeys offer valuable lessons.

### **MOORE FAMILY FARMS**

Since the 1830s, the sons and grandsons of Aaron Moore made a living farming vegetables and produce on 15 acres in North Carolina. That heritage was halted in the 1990s due to attrition of farm labor, many baby boomers leaving the farm for careers in the military, children of farmers seeking higher education and becoming professionals, and the well documented discriminatory practices that were incurred by socially disadvantaged and underserved Black farmers, especially in the South. For the past three decades, the Moore family leased their land to conventional farmers—but not anymore.

Robert and Dakota Moore of Moore Family Farms in Duplin County, North Carolina now care for that land. The farmers, a father and son team, are focused, goal-driven, strategic, and persistent as they work toward organic certification and GAP certification. They are growing mixed vegetables and fruits on 5 acres currently, with plans to expand mixed vegetable production to the full 15 acres, over time. In the meantime, Dakota and Robert are experimenting with cover crops on the acres they intend to expand on in the future. They have also built relationships with a wholesale market in their area, and regional organizations such as Rural Foundation Advancement International (RAFI-USA) and Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA), and currently are developing a crop rotation and food safety practices to suit market and production needs.



Dakota and Robert Moore, Moore Family Farms - Duplin County, NC

Robert notes, “This journey has been a bumpy road. Like starting any business, running a farm is complicated. Things have changed immensely since my father was farming. Now you have to set up pre-existing contracts with vendors to avoid the scramble of trying to sell your products locally at a farmers’ market or roadside sales. Additionally, you can’t just grow things randomly, but have to align your products to what buyers want to buy. That also calls for getting GAP and organic certification.”

Most of Moore Family Farms’ labor is hand labor at this point, which has also served as an opportunity to create a youth job training program for four young apprentices this summer. Additionally, Robert has focused significant energy on seeking grant funding to help fund needed equipment for the farm.

*Moore Family Farms cont.*

Beyond their ultimate goal of revitalizing the family farm, the Moore Family Farms team engages in important outreach to community members. In addition to the summer internship program, the Moores welcome school groups and host community members for lunch-and-learn programming to connect the community to the food they produce and to agriculture in the region. They are committed to producing high-quality produce with attention to ecological systems, land stewardship, and food safety.

Robert thinks the bumpy road is still a path worth taking. “The end goal makes it all worthwhile,” he shares. “I’m really excited about the possibilities for the future.”

## **FLYING S FARMS**

Corey Struck, along with his wife Laura and son, Henry (9), run Flying S Farms in Broadlands, Illinois, a 400 acre row crop operation producing its first organic crop this fall. Corey grew up on the farm, but then entered college and the military, serving in the United States Air Force as a flight engineer, and continuing his service as a Reservist. Corey’s first year back farming his family land was also his first year of transition, which everybody told him was a bad idea.



When he talks about his transition, Corey notes the “gaps” in farming knowledge he experienced while he was away from the farm pursuing his education and military career. “I wasn’t at home helping for 20 years,” Corey explained. “I had to fill in all of those gaps of what dad did that I didn’t see. There were a lot of those gaps.” Still, motivated by better health outcomes for future generations, and reaching toward a goal of having to work fewer jobs, a better work/life balance, and profitable farming at a smaller row crop scale, Corey and his family forged ahead.

Corey’s transition strategy was to allow for lower yields, keep fertility costs and liabilities low, and learn how to grow the crops he hoped to grow when coming out of organic transition during the transition period. During the three-year transition period, he grew corn, soybeans, and rye-based cover crop mixes. Corey added, “Which people tell you not to do, but the elevator here locally takes them. I knew how to sell them.”

Coming into his first year with a certified organic crop Corey forward contracted everything he insured, locking in a price and delivery plan. He shared that he wishes he would have transitioned a year earlier to have been able to take advantage of better contract prices on the front end, but that wasn’t an option as he was away on military orders. “It’s hard to cultivate land in Illinois from California,” he joked. He advises other transitioning producers to begin their transition when commodity prices are higher because the lower yields don’t hurt as much then if you’re not investing in a lot of fertility applications. “Fertility is a huge expense,” he notes.

With fertility in mind, Corey plans to diversify his rotation to focus on building soil biology and soil health. He is looking forward to incorporating wheat and longer-season cover crops in his rotation to grow both carbon and nitrogen, noting that building soil organic matter is correlated to farm profit, in addition to providing environmental benefits. He’s also looking forward to “planting some fence posts,” with eyes on incorporating cattle as part of the rotation and plenty of other animal and food production ideas for the farm and the family. Ultimately, despite the low prices on commodity crops heading into this fall, Corey remains hopeful, yet realistic. “We did it,” he says about the transition, “and we’ll see how this fall goes.”

## CONNECTION TO THE MOVEMENT

These farmers are not just interested in growing the food and feed, they are working to change the food system for the better. Dakota Moore, a recent graduate of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University is currently serving as the Research and Education Intern with the Organic Farming Research Foundation. He has also lent a beginning farmer perspective to the OFA Crop Insurance Workgroup. His father, Robert Moore, has been using his organizational management background to build relationships with markets, organizations, and allies in the movement, prioritizing education to connect the people in his community to food, agriculture, and health resources. Robert is also following the Farm Bill process, urging attention to policies that will serve historically underserved and beginning farmers. Dakota and Robert make a powerful team for change.

Corey Struck dives into topics that impact his farm and family, and learns everything he can. He entered the organic transition process well informed, and shared his experience with both the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) and the OFA Crop Insurance Workgroup over the last several years. He used his experience as a transitional farmer managing risk and markets to help inform OFA's ideas on crop insurance for producers in organic transition, and has advocated with the NOSB and the Risk Management Agency regarding what is needed to make crop insurance work better for transitional and organic producers. Corey is well informed on matters of organic policy related to Strengthening Organic Enforcement implementation and import testing, and shares his time and creativity in developing viable solutions that serve organic farmers and their communities through better health outcomes for future generations.

In the end, transitioning to organic farming is as much about perseverance and adaptability as it is about knowledge and planning. The stories shared here illustrate that while the path may be challenging, it is also deeply rewarding. 🌱



Julia Barton serves as the Farmer Services Director of the Organic Farmers Association. She loves working with farmers to identify challenges and find solutions.



## TOP TRANSITION QUESTIONS FROM RODALE CONSULTANT SAM HILBORN-NALUAI



Sam Hilborn-Naluai has been serving New Mexico and the surrounding region by supporting transitional producers on behalf of the Rodale Institute for the last 2.5 years. Sam also helps guide the Organic Farmers Association as a member of the Governing Council. She brings with her a background and skill set in animal science from New Mexico State University, and Horticulture from UC Davis.

Sam notes that transitioning to organic, even deciding whether or not to transition, is a process. "We talk about it. We talk about it some more. [The farmers] talk to their friends. They talk to other farmers. It just takes time." The investment of time is worth it, she notes as "You're building up the capacity of farmers, of the NRCS, of other technical assistance providers." The team of support and the social network that underpins collaboration among farmers, buyers, and service providers is a priority for Sam in supporting organic farmers through a successful organic transition.

Sam shared some of the most common questions she receives when working with producers transitioning to organic, and maybe you're thinking about how to answer them as well.

1. How do I transition to organic? What do I do?
2. What is the market for [X] commodity?
3. Is there a price premium for my product?
4. Which certifier do I choose? How do I go about choosing a certifier?
5. How much recordkeeping do I need to do?
6. What's the difference between regenerative and organic?

These questions are real, the answers are nuanced, and they are posed again and again by transitioning producers. If you or a friend are interested in pursuing organic transition, the [Rodale Consultant team](#) and the [OFA Farmer Services team](#) are here to help! We are working to coordinate with one another to help connect even more farmers to the expertise they need to make the transition as smooth as possible.