



## Fear of the unknown- Organic Confidence Needed

Posted by [Brandt Schisler](#)

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[Brandt Schisler](#)

[Fear of the unknown- Organic Confidence Needed](#)

May 08, 2019 01:06AM

Hello All!

Registered: 5 years ago

Posts: 28

I will do my best to keep this short, but a back story will help with any suggestions one may have. My wife and I took over a dying U-PICK Orchard here in central Missouri in October of 2017. There were 450 dwarf apple trees on MARK and BUD 9 rootstock still in production. First trees were planted in 1993 and they added on 300 trees every two years until they had 900 total. The lady was 80 yrs old and had a hard time with upkeep so trees were not pruned properly and overgrown. She had a conventional spray cycle of your typical synthetic chemicals (Imidan, captan, manzate prostick, etc.). Trees have been very susceptible to disease and have had multiple issues with bitter rot, scab, fireblight, aphids, Asian beetles, moths, etc. mainly because she would only spray 1/3 of the recommended amount and stop spraying in July. I have continued her spray schedule but have been spraying the recommended amounts due to these pest pressures, I spray at night because of honey bees but it still sickens me every time I have to suit up. However, we have turned the farm around and created a ag-tourism/educational farm that had approximately 12,000 visitors during the 2018 season bringing in revenue that can be used towards the higher up front costs of an organic production.

We are in our early thirties and have a lot of plans for this farm and at the top of the list is transferring everything over to the holistic/organic approach. My main goal has been soil health. Our soil is very clay heavy especially once you get down about 12 inches. We have spread wood chips from our local electric company under the trees and used homemade compost consisting of alpaca manure, chicken manure, with straw, leaves, wood ash, and broken down wood mulch. We are fortunate enough to have the company called blue bird organic compost only 20 min away and they have started using Mycorrhizae within their compost mix- this would be my go to for building soil health in future. We have plans to build a new orchard in 2021 using a high density system called 'Tall Spindle' where trees are 3' apart in rows and 12' between rows. Less pruning in this system and sprays go farther for the money. Rootstocks being used will be G41 and G11 to help limit fireblight. This new orchard will only be 75 yards from the old orchard(limited on space). Here are my questions:

- We have a lot of overhead and our livelihood relies on successful production of our apple trees. Catch 22 is that we continue to degrade our health with current conventional practices, but could lose the farm if our organic attempts fail.
- Is organic orcharding possible in high density systems?
- Is being that close to the old orchard going to make things impossible?
- The weather in Central Missouri is very humid and fungus issues run high- is Organics possible in the region where humidity and moisture is higher than the northern states?
- Somewhat off topic - but is a combination of chickens and turkeys running under the trees with multiple bat houses throughout the orchard a good pest management practice?
- Where should I start, and what is a reasonable timeline for me to get the proper things in place for a successful organic orchard?

Any suggestions or advice is appreciated, I know of only one other organic orchard in the state of Missouri and he is north of me almost 90 minutes and on more fertile soil (near Mississippi River), so I believe it is possible but will certainly be a great challenge.

Thank you!

Brandt

Edited 1 time(s). Last edit at 05/08/2019 01:10AM by Brandt Schisler.

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[Mike Biltonen](#)

[Re: Fear of the unknown- Organic Confidence Needed](#)

May 08, 2019 04:48AM

Registered: 10 years ago

Posts: 298

So, I don't want to start out being the Cassandra in the conversation, but my 35 years of growing tree fruit tells me you have a huge uphill battle. It's hard to tell from your description whether or not the orchard is still being sprayed conventionally, has been started to be transitioned, or what. If it is still being sprayed conventionally, then I would recommend putting together a 5-y ear plan to transition the orchard away from conventioanl but not go cold turkey. The diseases are a concerning an issue, but insects even more so. You will need to build the orchard's resilience (which you seem to have a good handle on) up to optimal levels before totally cutting the cord. This includes

not just the bearing trees, but the orchard support system as well - water, woods, biodiversity, etc. If you don't do that, since it is all interconnected, then it is likely the orchard will never be as strong as it could be. So, to answer your questions:

-Is organic orcharding possible in high density systems? *It is but it is tricky, Washington State does it all the time, but in a different climate. You don't have the deeply rooted trees with thicker trunks and branches to fend off borers and such that you have with bigger trees. But you can do it, just realize that overall resiliency is lower, but pest controls will work better because of better coverage, better drying, etc.*

-Is being that close to the old orchard going to make things impossible? *Again, not necessarily, but it certainly doesn't make it easier. Just be aware of the problems the old orchard presents and ever-vigilant to deal with issues that will invariably hit you.*

-The weather in Central Missouri is very humid and fungus issues run high- is Organics possible in the region where humidity and moisture is higher than the northern states? *Again, the answer is yes. But it will require more sprays, more monitoring of disease conditions, and choosing varieties that are resistant to the worst of them.*

-Somewhat off topic - but is a combination of chickens and turkeys running under the trees with multiple bat houses throughout the orchard a good pest management practice? *Not off topic at all. I would say yes to all, except turkeys, since turkeys like to roost and in smaller trees they'll problem cause more damage than they are worth. So, I'd say more chickens, a few guinea hogs, and a rattlesnake or two. Bat houses will be good for moths and such. Also encourage foxes and coyotes, and other predators of small animals like voles and mice.*

-Where should I start, and what is a reasonable timeline for me to get the proper things in place for a successful organic orchard? *At the beginning - LOL. I crack myself up. Really though, a 5-7 year time-frame to set up and transition to a fully organic/holistic orchard. I don't normally advertise my consulting services here, but the reality is that this requires more time and information than we've got here. If you're interested in some off-line consulting to address more directly your situation, please PM me and we can set something up.*

Any suggestions or advice is appreciated, I know of only one other organic orchard in the state of Missouri and he is north of me almost 90 minutes and on more fertile soil (near Mississippi River), so I believe it is possible but will certainly be a great challenge. *It is possible, but don't delude yourself, it will be a difficult uphill battle given your location and proximity to an older orchard.*

[Mike Biltonen, Know Your Roots](#)

Zone 5b in New York

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[Brandt Schisler](#)

[Re: Fear of the unknown- Organic Confidence Needed](#)

May 12, 2019 12:16AM

Mike,

Registered: 5 years ago

Posts: 28

Thank you very much for the feedback, it was well written and to the point and I appreciate that. We haven't started the transfer from conventional spraying on the current orchard since it is so old. Our thoughts is since we have such a uphill battle with the old orchard we would start fresh with a new orchard and focus on establishing the soil health 2 years prior to planting the trees (bare root trees at 5/8" diameter with 8-12 feather branches on G41 and G11 rootstock).

Overall, it sounds like I am in the right frame of thought, I just need to keep learning and applying the different organic practices to my environment until I can get it dialed in. Until then, we can run our business off of the current Orchard until either those trees live out the rest of their lives or I get the organic approach figured out.

Thanks again for the advice!

Brandt

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[Jason MacArthur](#)

[Re: Fear of the unknown- Organic Confidence Needed](#)

May 12, 2019 01:12PM

Registered: 6 years ago

Posts: 28

Brandt: It would seem to me that it might be helpful to think of this transition not in black and white terms but rather as a gradient along which you can move. Even if you are never fully able to transition your orchard to holistic or organic management you will have been successful because you will have reduced, if not eliminated, your dependence on chemical pesticides. As in the rest of life, success is not defined by achieving a goal but rather in moving towards it. Good luck!

Jason

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[Brandt Schisler](#)

[Re: Fear of the unknown- Organic Confidence Needed](#)

May 12, 2019 05:13PM

Registered: 5 years ago

Posts: 28

Very true Jason! I need to remember that the goal all in itself is to limit dependence on synthetic sprays and fertilizer for not only the health of myself and others, but for the health of our orchard and environment. By owning this piece of land I feel I have an obligation to do what's right.

I have been, and will continue, to read through these forums for ideas and want to thank everyone in advance for their help during this transition of ours.

Thanks,  
Brandt

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