

Cultivating Change: A Path to Organic Transition

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Farmers and educators gathered in Price, Utah, for a forum on organic farming to explore how organic practices can succeed and grow across the state. The event was hosted by Utah State University Extension and the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) and planned by Michele Schahczenski, outreach coordinator.

Jared Corpron, current steward of his family's Sevier County farm, which boasts a 134-year heritage, was in attendance. He and his wife are the third owners of the property and have recently embarked on a journey to transition it to organic production. While the farm once produced primarily corn and alfalfa, the couple now grows a wide variety of crops, including tomatoes, cucumbers, melons, and berries, many of which aren't typically suited to the area.

"Our goal next year will be to have 110 different types of vegetables," he said.

For Corpron, the decision to go organic isn't just about crops, it's about reconnecting with the farm's roots. He says his great-grandparents and previous generations grew nearly everything they ate, trading only small surpluses locally. Today, Utah produces less than 3% of its own vegetables, with most traveling many miles from California, Mexico, or even South America before reaching local tables.

"The goal is to help bring back that pioneer heritage of 'let's grow our own food,'" he said.

Events offered by TOPP provide the support farmers like Corpron need. Speakers at the event shared information

on resources available to those transitioning to organic production, including guidance on certification and strategies for soil health, weed management, and crop diversity. For farmers navigating the challenges of going organic, these programs provide practical tools and a network of support that helps them turn ambitious goals, like Corpron's plan for a wide variety of crops, into a reality.

Another presenter, organic farmer Greg Bingham, offered insight from the other side of the transition. Having fully converted his operation to organic production several years ago, he now grows crops such as alfalfa, corn, and barley, proving that even traditional commodities can thrive under organic practices. He acknowledged that the process wasn't easy, especially when it comes to things like fertilization and pest or weed management without the use of prohibited substances to combat those challenges.

"Getting with groups of people that are like-minded and going to classes like this where you can learn and get educated will help a lot," Bingham said. "A lot of what I put into practice was from situations like this."

Bingham's experience echoed one of the key themes of the day, that success in organic farming often depends on both community and education. Many of the strategies he mentioned were reinforced by experts like Earl Creech, USU Extension agronomist, who spoke about one of the most common hurdles for organic farmers.

"One of the biggest challenges I've seen with transitioning from a conventional farm to an organic farm is weed management," Creech said. "Because weeds on an organic operation can't be treated with conventional herbicides, keeping them under control requires careful planning and alternative strategies. Programs offered through TOPP and USU Extension provide exactly this kind of support. They offer guidance on organic-approved weed control methods, crop rotation strategies, and technical advice to help farmers manage these challenges effectively."

Beyond the technical discussions, the event also featured presentations from certification specialists and other experts who outlined the resources available to producers considering the move to organic. Speakers shared information about the certification process, technical assistance, and training opportunities offered through programs like USU Extension and the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food. These programs are designed to help farmers navigate challenges such as soil health, pest control, and record-keeping while meeting organic standards.

The event highlighted how collaboration between researchers, educators, and producers can make organic farming more accessible across Utah. For many, it's not just about changing how they grow, it's about building a network that makes long-term success possible.

Farmers like Jared Corpron are part of that growing movement. As he continues the process of transitioning his family's Sevier County farm, the support shared through programs like TOPP and USU Extension provides practical tools and connections that help make goals like his, and the future of organic farming in Utah, more attainable.

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