A growing number of customers are interested in buying organic tea and paying a higher price for this kind of tea, as was discussed in Section 13.3. In addition, producing tea organically protects the farmer from toxic pesticides, and helps protect the soil and the farm. However, producing tea organically requires knowledge and good farming skills. Especially, the period of converting to organic production can be difficult. It often takes 2-3 years before the farm ecosystem becomes adjusted to the new, organic system of production. Managing pests and soil fertility during the 2-3 year conversion period can be difficult.

14.1 What is organic production?
Organic production means producing a crop (or other agricultural product such as livestock) without using synthetic pesticides or chemical fertilizers or growth regulators. This does not mean that the farmer does nothing to manage his or her crop. Instead, the farmer must be very active to be able to manage pests and soil fertility organically.

Anyone could claim that their farm is organic. So, how can customers have confidence that the tea they are buying is really organic? The answer is, by buying only tea produced on farms that are certified as being organic. To be certified as organic, your farm must be inspected by a representative of a certifying organization. There are several organizations that certify farms in Asia as organic. Most of these certifying organizations follow international standards set by IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements). IFOAM also has a role in “checking” if certifying organizations work in accordance with its standards and procedures. Within Viet Nam, an organization named FoodLink (official name Viet Nam Association for Organic Agriculture) is working to establish an inspection and certification system for organic agriculture in Viet Nam. You can contact FoodLink through CIDSE (see CIDSE’s address in the Preface of this Ecological Guide).

Once your farm has been certified as organic by a certifying organization, you have the right to use the symbol for the organization on the label for your product. Customers interested in organic products will buy only products that have the symbol.

The exact rules that you must follow for your farm to be certified as organic, depend on which certifying organization you choose. It is important to choose a certifying organization that your customers know and trust (ask your customers if they have a preference). Some rules that are followed by many certifying organizations include:
1. No synthetic pesticides, chemical fertilizers or growth regulators used within the past few years. This is because some agrochemicals can persist in the soil for several years, contaminating crops that are supposed to be chemical-free.

2. To avoid the risk that pesticide sprays drift in the wind from neighboring farms onto the organic farm, the organic farm should have a (living) fence and a border area of around 10 meters (Foodlink standards). The organic farm should also take measures that the neighboring farms does not contaminate it with pesticides or fertilizers through run-off water, etc.

3. Many certifying organizations allow the use of biological pesticides (such as viruses against caterpillars) and allow the use of inorganic fertilizers (such as rock phosphate or lime) in moderate doses.

4. The farmer must have a long-term plan for maintaining the fertility of the soil (for example, using green-manure crops, using mulch to protect against erosion, etc.) Many certifying agencies want the entire farm to be managed in a way that will protect and improve the soil over the long term, and recycle nutrients as much as possible.

Does this sound like a lot of rules? Well, it is. Not every farmer will want to convert to certified organic production. But remember: the rules are intended to make the farming system healthy and sustainable in the long term. The rules benefit the farmer (and his or her children and grandchildren) as much as they benefit the customers.

14.2 Main differences between IPM production and organic production

IPM and organic agriculture share many principles, such as managing the crop ecosystem to help manage pests (Section 2.3 in Chapter Two). Some of the main differences between IPM production and certified organic production are discussed below.

14.2.1 Organic pest management (insects, diseases, and weeds)

IPM can include the careful use of agrochemicals when necessary. In contrast, organic agriculture completely excludes the use of chemical inputs (fertilisers and growth-stimulants as well as pesticides).

This chapter can not teach you to manage pests organically (that would require a specialized training course). But to help farmers judge whether or not they want to try organic production, it is useful to mention two key points. First, the key to pest management in organic agriculture is prevention. Prevention includes:

- Managing the farm to produce a strong crop, capable of resisting or even escaping attack by diseases. Many of the chapters in this Guide give information about growing a strong crop. In addition, some experts say that switching to 100% organic
fertilizers (including manure and compost) will produce stronger crops that are more resistant to diseases.

- Promoting a healthy balance between pests and natural enemies. An important tool for promoting balance and stability is to increase diversity within the farm. Increasing diversity means, having more types of organisms and more types of places for them to live. For example, shade trees and green manure crops provide flowers (for food) and living spaces for useful natural enemies. Even mulch can provide living space for natural enemies like spiders and ground beetles.

A second point is that some curative tools are permitted in organic agriculture. In other words, even if a certain pest starts to become too abundant, you will have some options for controlling it. For example, some certifying organizations permit the use of virus and other disease micro-organisms against insect pests, and some permit the use of insecticides made from plants (see Chapter Twelve). For controlling diseases, sprays of "tea" made by soaking compost in cool water are permitted and are often helpful. It may also be helpful (and permitted) to apply fungicides made from certain wild plants (see Chapter Twelve).

14.2.2 Sustainable soil and nutrient management

IPM focuses mostly on pests and the crop. But organic agriculture, in addition, includes the sustainable, long-term management of soil health. Soil that contains a diverse and abundant mixture of organisms will produce healthier crops and will help reduce pest problems. Excessive amounts of synthetic fertilizers can reduce the number and diversity of living things in the soil.

To promote long-term sustainability, organic agriculture tries to ensure that nutrients are not used up more quickly than they can be made available. Specifically, organic agriculture tries to ensure that the nutrient cycle is completed within the farm (for more information about nutrient cycles, see Chapter Three). This helps guarantee that nutrients (like nitrogen) are recycled and re-used as much as possible. In Europe and the U.S., where farms are larger, some certifying organizations require that all fertilizer inputs (including compost, green manure, and animal manure) be produced on the same farm where they are used. This may not be practical on the smaller farms of Viet Nam; even organic farms may need to "import" some plant material to make compost, or some animal manure, from other farms or fields within the village or within the commune. Nonetheless, the goal is clear: organic farms should produce as much of their own nutrients as possible, to ensure a nutrient cycle that is as self-contained and sustainable as possible.

14.2.3 Managing the whole farm, not just the tea crop

In organic agriculture, it is the farm that is certified, not just the tea crop. This means that the rules for organic agriculture must be followed in all the agricultural activities of the farm, including other crops and production of livestock. More broadly, it means that the farmer needs to think about the entire farm as a system in which all parts works together. For example, the farm probably needs some animals to provide manure. And, the farm probably needs some green-manure crops to provide high-protein feed for the animals. The farmer should choose a mixture of crops and animals that works together.
to recycle nutrients and produce a healthy, stable ecosystem. This focus on the whole farm usually is not a part of IPM, but is very important in organic agriculture.

14.3 The period of conversion between conventional and organic production

The rules of most certifying organizations require a conversion period of at least one year, but sometimes several years. The reason is, sometimes several years must pass before the residues of agrochemicals in the soil finally disappear. During the conversion period, you have the disadvantage of not being allowed to use pesticides or chemical fertilizers. At the same time, you do not yet have the advantage of selling your tea as organic. So, the conversion period can be a difficult time.

There is a second reason why the conversion period can be difficult. After many years of using pesticides and chemical fertilizers, your farm may not have a good ecological balance. So, when you suddenly stop using pesticides and chemical fertilizers, your farm may not yet have a healthy diversity of natural enemies, soil micro-organisms, and other helpful living things. For this reason, pests may cause problems, and it may be somewhat difficult to achieve a good level of balanced fertility in the soil. After a few years, however, both pest management and soil fertility will become easier, thanks to a diverse healthy mixture of beneficial living things.

To help farmers make enough money during the difficult transition period, some certifying organizations allow farmers to label and sell their products as "organic in conversion" products. Customers who understand the system may be willing to pay a bit higher price for "organic in conversion" products than for regular products that are grown with pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

14.4 Should I convert? Advantages and disadvantages

After reading this chapter, you should have a better understanding of what organic production means, and what steps must be taken to convert your farm to organic production. Now, should you go ahead and convert to an organic production system? As always, we think that each farmer will have to decide for herself or himself. Some advantages and disadvantages are listed on the following page.
Some disadvantages of converting to organic production:

1. **Yields may be somewhat lower**, mostly because of the difficulty of providing enough organic fertilisers (compost, manure, green manure, etc.) to satisfy the nutrient requirements of the crop, especially nitrogen and potassium ("kali").

2. **Pests may be more difficult to manage**, at least during the 2-3 year conversion period.

3. **If a pest does begin to cause damage, you will have fewer curative tools** compared to a farmer who can use synthetic pesticides (but, remember that most certifying organizations do allow some low-toxicity curative tools such as disease organisms to control insects, and compost "teas" to control plant diseases).

4. **The market for organic tea is still relatively small**, and so far, is concentrated in countries outside of Viet Nam (requires export).

5. **You will have to agree to the rules of organic production**. In particular, having your farm certified as organic requires you to allow inspectors to visit your farm about once per year and check what you are doing.

Some advantages of converting to organic production:

1. **The market for organic tea is growing quickly**. And, recent publicity about the health benefits of drinking green tea may increase demand for organic tea, because people drinking tea for their health would probably be interested in organic tea.

2. **Prices for organic tea are generally higher** than those for conventional teas. Consumers are willing to pay more for a safer product, but at the other hand also "demand" certain guarantees that the tea is genuinely produced according to organic standards.

3. **Concentrating on a "specialty market" will reduce your competition**. Because most tea farmers are not organic, there is much less competition among the farmers who are growing organic tea.

4. **CIDSE, CECI, and SNV have projects to help you market organic tea**. These projects may lead to the development of a domestic market for organic teas, offering some market stability for organic producers.

5. **Pest management probably would not be too difficult**. In tea, insects usually can be kept under control by natural enemies and by good management of the ecosystem (for example, planting shade trees to manage thrips and red spider mites). Weeds can be kept under control by mulching. Disease management under organic production may require some experimentation and study. The Phu Tho tea TOT course in 1999 conducted an experiment to evaluate organic tea production. They found that tea plants grew well, produced a good yield, and had no substantial insect or disease problems. However, organic tea farmers in Thai Nguyen have had trouble with mosquito bugs and blister blight.

6. **The health of you and your family would be protected**. Never again would you have to worry about how exposure to agrochemicals is harming you or your children.

7. **The health of your farm would be protected**. Organic agriculture focuses on nutrient cycles, soil health, and a balanced diverse ecosystem. All these things will preserve and improve the health of your farm for you, your children, and your grandchildren.