

RURAL ISSUES, RURAL PERSPECTIVES

Seed databases boosting organic production

Xenia Gatzert

Organic farming is reliant on the organic seed market. Databases are increasing knowledge of seed availability and are strengthening the sector in Europe.



Xenia Gatzert,
Research Institute
of Organic
Agriculture (FiBL)
xenia.gatzert@fibl.org

According to the current EU regulation on organic farming⁽¹⁾ which sets out the principles, aims and overarching rules of organic production, the use of organically produced seed and vegetative propagation material (plant reproductive material) is mandatory. Indeed, it is considered to be a fundamental principle of organic farming itself.

Despite efforts undertaken to ensure the availability of a wide range of organically produced seed or vegetative propagation material, for various reasons, there is still not enough organic plant reproductive material accessible for some species.

In such cases, derogations can be granted by national authorities for the use of untreated, conventionally produced seeds and vegetative propagated plant material. The use of chemically treated seeds in organic agriculture is however prohibited. According to the upcoming revision of the organic Regulation,⁽²⁾ these derogations are expected to expire by 2036.

ORGANIC SEEDS CATEGORISATION

An increasing number of EU Member States categorise organic seeds and vegetative propagation material into three categories, depending on the availability of seed. Member States are also required to set up a database to register and publish available organic propagation material in the country.

Based on this system, authorities can define in which cases derogations may be granted. Where there is sufficient diversity of cultivars and quantity of seeds available on the market at the national level, derogations are not granted for commercial purposes (Category I),

Table: National Annex categorising plant material depending on availability⁽³⁾

National Annex	Availability of organic seed	Derogation
Category I	●●●	No derogation
Category II	●●	Individual derogation
Category III	●	General derogation

whereas in cases of no or a very limited variety of species available as organically propagated seed, a general derogation (Category III) is to be granted. All crops where organic seed is available, but not in sufficient quantity to introduce an obligatory use of organic seed, fall within Category II. Categories can be changed by an expert or stakeholder panel according to a changing market situation and information from the database.

To date, 16 Member States have implemented online databases to facilitate the organic seed market by increasing transparency around the availability of organic seeds in real time. Farmers are obliged to use organic seed of a certain variety if it is entered into the database and marked as available, thus the database provides the legal foundation for granting derogation in cases of absence of organic seed and vegetative propagation material of Category II. The remaining Member States tend to provide a downloadable list with available organic seeds.

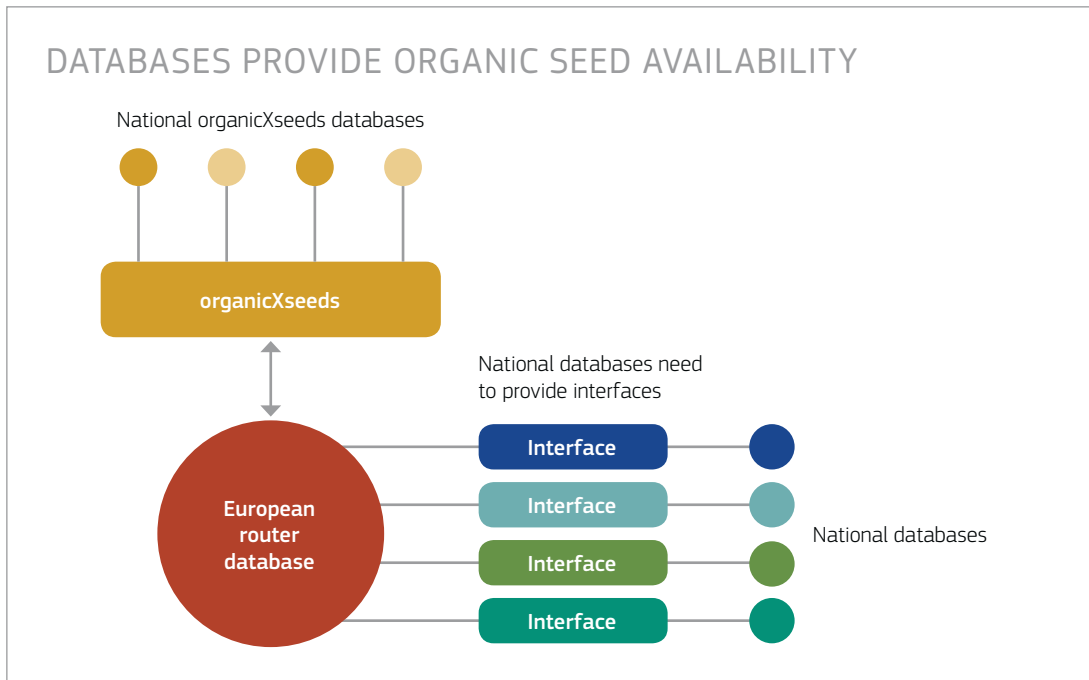
DATABASE PROFILE

The most commonly used organic seed database is FiBL's organicXseeds which is implemented in

(1) European Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 and its Commission Implementing Regulation (EC) No 889/2008.

(2) https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/news/new-organic-regulation_en

(3) Kurrig et al., 'Organic seed databases for increasing the transparency and use of organic seed in Europe', 2018. www.liveseed.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Kurrig_-_organic-seed-databases-2018.pdf



six EU Member States (Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden, the UK) and Switzerland. The real-time availability of organic seed is made possible by providing online accounts for each user (farmer, seed supplier, control body and competent authority). It is utilised by seed suppliers to publish their offer, by farmers to find seeds and apply online for derogation permits, by control bodies or local authorities to evaluate and approve demands for derogation permits, and by authorities to extract statistical data about derogations and availability of organic seeds.

BEST PRACTICE FROM GERMANY

A good practice example can be found in Germany which has been using the organicXseeds database since 2005. Two expert groups, one on arable crops and one on vegetable crops, consisting of stakeholders from the organic seed supply chain (including farmers' representatives, organic control bodies, breeders) advise the national competent authority on all issues related to organic seeds. During the annual meeting of the expert groups, the categorisation of crops, as well as the yearly derogation report are discussed to improve the availability and use of organic seeds. At present Category I encompasses 16 arable and 8 vegetable crops.

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

The Liveseed project with 49 partners in 18 countries is looking to increase the availability of cultivars adapted to organic growing conditions in Europe. One of

the aims of the project, funded under the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, is to develop a European Router Database. The database will allow seed suppliers to enter their offers and ask for approval in multiple countries. By linking national databases, Liveseed wants to help establish a level playing field in the organic seed market and improve transparency, performance and harmonisation.

Another aim of the Liveseed project is to foster organic plant breeding, improve the guidelines for cultivar testing and develop innovative seed health strategies. Liveseed will therefore help to develop much needed concepts and strategies adapted to the needs and principles of organic farming. Those interested in organic seed and plant breeding can become stakeholders in the project and receive first-hand information.

FiBL is an independent, non-profit research institute aiming to advance cutting-edge science in the field of organic agriculture.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

FiBL: www.fibl.org

FiBL organicXseeds database:
www.organicXseeds.com

Liveseed project: www.liveseed.eu