# Talking about Sustainable Orchards: A Communications Toolkit

Welcome to Talking about Sustainable Orchards, a communications toolkit to help you communicate more effectively about your growing practices when you talk with people who visit your orchard, farm, or farmstand.

In this collection of resources, you will find ways to cultivate more science-rich, curiosity-driven conversations about how you farm – and specific strategies for explaining EcoCertified practices.

While you can explore these resources in any order, we suggest that you start with either "A Note for the Farm Manager" or "Why Talk to Visitors About Agriculture." These pieces are designed to orient toolkit users.

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*This Toolkit was completed with the support of Northeast Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education (SARE).*

# A Note for the Farm Manager

Dear Farm Manager:

We at Red Tomato are excited to share these communications resources with you. We believe that these evidence-based ideas will help us all navigate familiar communications challenges and find our way to more satisfying conversations about our growing practices.

This toolkit was developed under the Northeast SARE Research & Education Grant Program to shift growers' communication with the public toward a more productive understanding of the complexities of agriculture in regional contexts. The goal is to help orchard visitors understand what EcoCertified means for the health of their environment and community.

In this resource set, you'll find strategies that can be applied to several different orchard communications opportunities.

Some of the ideas can be built into your website copy, your newsletters, or your signage. Other ideas might make more sense for face-to-face conversations with visitors to your orchard or farm stand. All of them are backed by original communications research undertaken by the Farming and Food Narrative Project, in partnership with the FrameWorks Institute. This national project seeks to reframe the narrative around crop farming. It draws on insights from cognitive science that help us understand how people think about an issue – and how to get them to rethink their assumptions. It offers a way to navigate

We created this set of resources in partnership with orchard managers like you for two reasons.

First, we **heard your need for them.** Sometimes it can be hard to know if we are giving the best possible answer to questions about pesticide use and other concerns that visitors raise. This toolkit applies new framing research to the specific needs shared by EcoCertified Fruit growers.

Second, we truly believe that **on-farm conversations about EcoCertified growing practices make a positive difference.** For sustainable, local farms to get the support they need from communities, people need to understand what we do. Your passion and know-how about farming are irreplaceable resources in our shared quest to build public understanding. When growers are the messengers, the messages have more power with the public.

We're excited to share these resources with you and look forward to learning more about your experience with them.

# Getting Started: Explainer Videos

These videos offer a quick way to start your journey toward more satisfying conversations with visitors. Each is about two minutes long.

Why Talk with Visitors about Agriculture?
When people visit our orchards, we have a unique opportunity to help them rethink farming.

Talking About Pesticides
Start with the basic concept that every farm must protect their crops from insects, animals, and diseases.

"Is This Organic?" What to Say When…It Isn't
When people ask this question, it's an important opportunity for agricultural education.

# 4 Easy Ways to Spark Visitor Curiosity

Our orchard visitors represent a slice of the public that is motivated to learn about how and where their food is grown. When we show them that our doors are open to questions, many will take the opportunity to learn more. It's not helpful to force conversations, but we can invite them. Here are a few subtle ways to signal to the curious that you'd enjoy talking more about growing practices.

## 1. Invitation at Entry

Always invite visitors to ask questions and learn about how the orchard is managed. Your typical visitor experience has opportunities to extend this invitation:

- **Ticket booth interactions.** Conclude your transaction with a simple encouragement to learn more. Here are some examples of what you could say.

  *If you are ever curious about what we do to protect the environment while producing great fruit, please just ask one of our staff.*

  *Be sure to check out the explainers that are near the fruit in the field. You can learn a lot about what it takes to grow fruit sustainably in this region.*

- **Website copy.** If your website offers instructions to help people plan their visits, include the idea that they should make time to talk with orchard staff about how the operation protects the environment while producing great fruit.

## 2. Flair wear

Make staff more approachable with pins, shirts, or aprons that invite questions. Options: *Ask me about EcoCertified*, or *Bee Squad: Ask me how I protect pollinators!*

## 3. Posters

Use your walls to build understanding of ecological growing practices.

These sites offer free, professionally designed posters to download and print:

https://www.pollinator.org/shop/posters

http://ipm.ucanr.edu/IPMPROJECT/ADS/poster_naturalenemies.html

https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/features/posters/pollinators.pdf

Personalize them by adding a sticky note that reads, "ask us about how we practice this in our orchard!" And stay tuned for new posters from Red Tomato.

## 4. Explanatory Signs Near the Fruit

Whether in the field or in the store, "explainer" texts placed near fruit are sure to reach the visitors who are most interested in a particular product.

Explainers can be on signs or on resources that visitors can take with them. Printed takeaways are always popular. Consider using a QR code that sends visitors to your website to reduce use of paper.

# Explaining EcoCertified Fruit to Visitors

Emphasizing the unique characteristics of the EcoCertified approach can help you to distinguish your produce – and it can also help to deepen public understanding of farming. When we explain integrated growing practices to our visitors, we equip them to support sustainable agriculture with their voices, their votes, and their choices.

**Rigorous**
"EcoCertified is a **strict,** environmentally friendly standard that we meet each year through **audits** by an independent nonprofit organization. To become EcoCertified, farms must **adhere** to the most environmentally friendly growing practices possible in our region."

**Holistic**
"The EcoCertified approach treats each farm as an **interconnected** ecosystem. We consider the soil, the water, the weather, and the plants, insects, and animals that live here – and think about how they all **work together** with our trees and crops. We focus on things like building up healthy soil and healthy levels of beneficial insects. We take special care to protect pollinators, like bees and butterflies, so our **ecosystem is healthy and vibrant**."

**Local**
"Local orchards keep our communities beautiful and buzzing with economic activity, while providing high-quality produce that doesn't need to be shipped from far away. The EcoCertified approach makes it possible to grow tree fruits that can only grow here, in ways that work here."

**Preventative**
"We **actively manage** our trees to keep them healthy. Whether it's pruning in the right way or raking up fallen leaves right away, the steps we take are designed to **prevent** harmful insects or diseases from getting a foothold in our orchard."

**Balanced**
"The EcoCertified approach builds on the farming know-how built up over generations of local farming, while reaching toward the future by using the latest science, technology, and innovation. EcoCertified approaches help farmers **balance** the wisdom of the past with the possibilities of the future. EcoCertified helps farmers make **steady** progress toward environmental goals despite **unsteady** weather patterns, **ever-changing** economic conditions, and other factors that make farming a **shaky** business."

# Explaining EcoCertified Practices

When visitors are interested in learning more about our orchards or our growing practices, it's a good opportunity to explain ecological practices.

To make the most of our conversations with curious visitors, it's important to talk in ways that:

- spark visitor curiosity;
- build deeper understanding of what it takes to grow apples sustainably in the Northeast region;
- highlight something interesting, making it more likely they will repeat it; and
- steer clear of topics or wording that might trigger negative attitudes or reinforce misconceptions.

Two EcoCertified practices that fit the bill: the ways we protect pollinators, and the way we use sticky sphere traps.

Recommended descriptions of these practices are below, along with a peek into the communications science principles used to develop each. Learning the principles can help you choose your words wisely whenever you speak to visitors. They are the important things to remember, for example, if you are in the field and can't use a script.

Two communications insights that are built into both examples

- Before explaining what you do, say why you do it. Start by expressing your commitment to the environment, or provide essential background information.
- Say *insects and diseases* instead of using the generic term *pests.* People associate it with "pesticides," and assume that all pesticides harm the environment and threaten human health.

# Pollinator Protection

(Avoiding pesticide application during bloom season)

"We believe we all have a responsibility to protect pollinating insects and animals, which are essential to about 8 out of every 10 crops we eat. Without pollinators, our diet would quickly be reduced to just a few wind-pollinated plants, like corn or wheat.

In our ecosystem, pollinators include honeybees and bumble bees, as well as birds, bats, and butterflies. The pollinators benefit the orchard by allowing the trees to bear fruit, and the orchard benefits the pollinators by providing a habitat with food and places to reproduce. It all works together.
One of the many things we do to protect pollinators is to take special care when the apple blossoms are open. This is when the pollinators do their critical work and are drinking up the nectar. When they are feasting on the flowers, they may also drink in any treatment we apply to the trees or surrounding land.
We take many steps to prevent the need for treatments, but problems like powdery mildew and leaf spot disease are common in this region. We try to head them off by pruning the trees in ways that allow lots of air and light into the canopy.

Sometimes the diseases get started anyway. At that point, the treatment is a fungicide.

The fungicides we use don't harm bees right away, but some experts are concerned that they make it harder for them to reproduce later in the season. So, we take extra care to avoid treatment when the blossoms are open. When the buds are first forming, that's our cue to check each tree very carefully. If we see signs of disease then, that lets us catch it and apply the treatment before the pollinators start showing up to feast!"

Inside the CommSci

- Start by expressing a commitment to pollinators. This helps to create common ground with environmentally conscious visitors.
- People understand that natural systems rely on interconnections, but this understanding is thin. By spelling out an example of how the farm and pollinators work together, this explanation makes public understanding more robust.
- This description names *powdery mildew* and *leaf spot disease* rather than the more common problem of *scab,* which could spark a sense of disgust.
- Avoid the term *pesticides* because it triggers public concerns about food safety. Instead, use more precise terms like *fungicide* and the names of specific diseases.

# Bait and See

(Sticky sphere traps to monitor apple maggots)

"Every farm must protect its crops against diseases and insects. One insect that's common in our area is the railroad worm. Railroad worms are a native insect that used to feed on wild hawthorn trees. Over time, they have learned to love apple orchards! They are called railroad worms because they tunnel through apples and leave black tracks behind them that look a little like railroad tracks. To a grower, they look like a major risk: railroad worms can ruin a crop quickly.

We use special sticky traps to keep an eye on the levels of railroad worms in the orchard. The traps are red spheres that look a little like apples. We coat them with an all-natural mixture of oils, resin, and wax. It's called tanglefoot because it traps insects permanently. We check the traps regularly from July to September. When we catch five adult flies, then we know we need to treat the trees.

This "bait and see" method helps us avoid using chemical insecticides if we don't have to. When it's the most responsible options, we use only the amount we need, right when it is needed. This is in keeping with our EcoCertified approach, which focuses on creating a healthy farm ecosystem that keeps diseases and harmful insects away, reduces reliance on chemical insecticides, and uses the least-toxic, lowest-risk options overall."

Inside the CommSci

- Start by providing the essential background information: Every farm must protect its crops from insects, diseases, and wildlife.
- This description avoids terms that are commonplace for growers, but might spark a sense of disgust for visitors. We chose the term *railroad worms* because it sounds more pleasant than *apple maggot.*
- Avoid the term *pesticides* because it triggers public concerns about food safety. Instead, use more precise terms like *insecticide* and the names of harmful insects.

# Describing EcoCertified Apples

Because people who visit farms are more interested in learning more about nature and agriculture than the average person, orchard visitors represent a key audience for agricultural outreach and education.

**Including just a little agricultural science into our product descriptions is one way we can all help to build the agricultural literacy of the people we reach.**

See below for descriptions of major EcoCertified apple varieties that:

- Incorporate the information that eaters most want to know about apples: how to recognize them, how they taste, how to best use them, when to get them, and how to store them
- Connect people to the rich history of sustainable orchards in our region
- Build agricultural literacy by explaining a single, interesting ecological growing practice

Feel free to use these descriptions for your own signs, website copy, or other communications materials. If you develop descriptions for other varieties, we recommend that you follow the formula described in the bullet points above. And we hope that you'll share your new-and-improved descriptions with us here at Red Tomato!

## McIntosh

You can spot a McIntosh apple by its beautiful, two-color red-and-green peel. "Macs" are crisp, juicy, and have a balanced sweet-tart flavor. They smell great, making them a fresh-eating favorite for folks who like a slightly tart apple.

You can eat McInstosh apples straight, or use them to make the perfect applesauce or apple butter. Try mixing them into a pie with firmer varieties like Granny Smith. The McIntosh apples break down a bit, creating a sweet, lucious sauce around firmer apple pieces.

McIntosh apples ripen late September - early October in the northeast US. To keep them tasting great after peak season, keep them in the crisper drawer of your refrigerator wrapped in a damp paper towel.

McIntosh apples are a true heritage variety, first discovered in Canada. Orchards have been growing them in the northeast US since the early 1800s.

To keep McIntosh trees healthy in this part of the country, growers have to prevent wooly apple aphids from damaging trunks and stems. One way to do this is to encourage a fierce-looking little bug called an earwig to take up residence and eat the aphids that eat the trees.

## Cortland

The Cortland apple is bright red, with a sweet-tart flavor and crisp white flesh that is incredibly juicy.

One of the nice things about Cortland apples is that they are slow to brown once they are cut. This makes Cortlands great for recipes that call for fresh apples, like fruit salads or fruit kabobs. They are also good for eating fresh or making pies, cobblers, or crisps.

Cortlands are often ripe in late September, but since they don't often drop naturally from the trees, they can be picked fresh through mid-October. To store them for the winter, keep them in the crisper drawer of your refrigerator wrapped in a damp paper towel.

Growers developed this apple in 1898 in Cortland County, New York by crossing McIntosh and Ben Davis varieties, and has been a New England favorite ever since. To keep our Cortland apple trees healthy, we keep an eye out for the pesky 'railroad worm' using red, plastic traps that look a bit like apples. Can you spot them in this row?

## Empire

Empire is a sweet apple with a super crunchy texture and bright white flesh.

Empire apples are best when eaten fresh, and are great for lunchboxes since they don't bruise easily. Otherwise, they are a solid all-purpose apple good for drying, making juice or sauce, or baking in pies, cobblers, and crisps.

Empire apples tend to be ready to harvest in late September and are best when eaten fresh. They will keep well for a month or two if stored in the crisper drawer of your refrigerator wrapped in a damp paper towel.

The Northeast is the natural home of Empire Apples, which were first cultivated in the 1940s at Cornell University by crossing McIntosh and Red Delicious varieties.

Orchard pros often plant Empire trees not only because they yield popular apples, but also naturally resist a plant disease called cedar apple rust.

## Jonagold

The Jonagold is a large, sweet, flavorful apple with honey notes and tangy aftertaste. Its thin skin is red with green undertones, and it has a pale yellow flesh, which is crisp and juicy.

Jonagold apples are a good all-around apple, ideal for baking in pies, cakes and tarts or roasting along with vegetables. Their flavor also lends itself nicely to jams, sauces, and ciders.

Jonagold apples typically ripen in late September. These apples taste best when eaten within two or three months of picking, but keep especially well and if refrigerated, can last up to eight months.

Jonagolds were developed at Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences by crossing the crisp Golden Delicious and the hardy Jonathan apple.

To help keep our trees healthy, we are extra careful to rake up fallen leaves and fruit on a regular basis, because leaving them creates a place for diseases like apple scab to get started.

# Answering Tough FAQs

The questions that visitors ask most frequently about growing practices show that they are curious and caring about how their food is produced. We can all feel more confident about answering them if we look to communications science to guide our responses.

This resource provides suggested responses to questions that EcoCertified growers told us they encountered often. It also offers a peek into the communications science principles used to develop the recommended responses. Look for the "Inside the CommSci" pullouts to learn a bit about the framing principle built into the message. These principles can help you respond more fluently in real-time conversations.

You'll notice that these questions could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," but the suggested response offers more background. Why? When people ask questions like these, we have a chance to engage in a bit of agricultural education. We don't have to launch into lecture-mode. But we should be ready to offer an explanation, not just a one-word answer.

We need the public to understand what we do. Without a better sense of what happens on farms, they can't use their voices, their votes, or their choices to support us.

That's why each of these recommended responses have been designed to:

- extend the conversation,
- reassure the consumer, and
- build a more accurate understanding of what it takes to grow great fruit in regions where organic protocols aren't a great fit.

## Are you organic?

"We grow according to a strict ecological standard called EcoCertified Fruit. Eco practices have a lot in common with other environmentally-friendly farming approaches. We treat the farm as a holistic ecosystem and focus on building up healthy soil and healthy levels of beneficial wildlife and insects. We use lots of different creative and scientifically-proven strategies to prevent plant diseases and harmful insects from damaging our plants in the first place, rather than defaulting to spraying just to kill off anything that might be lurking. And we make it a priority to use the least-toxic, least-risky option that will be effective in a particular situation.

Inside the CommSci:

This answer starts with a positive statement about what is true.

A clear, affirmative statement is more powerful than beginning with a negative, like, "No, it's not organic, but..."

The principle of *leading with the affirmative case* is built into all the recommended answers in this resource.

Would you like to learn more? I could tell you more about EcoCertified Fruit / I could connect you with someone who really knows about EcoCertified Fruit / You could take this brochure to dig deeper and compare and contrast the certification standards for EcoCertified Fruit and organic fruit."

## Why *aren't* you organic?

"We care about the environment and we chose an eco-friendly standard that worked for us. It's called EcoCertification. This strict environmental standard was designed for tree fruit growers in the Northeast, so it's a good choice for us.

*Inside the CommSci:*

This answer starts by reassuring the visitor about your environmental values and commitments. It explains a genuine challenge related to organic standards without falling into the trap of undermining or devaluing it.

Here in the Northeast, the weather, plant diseases, and insect varieties make the USDA organic standard unworkable for orchards that produce enough for grocery stores. We're balancing the environmental and community benefits of growing locally with the environmental conditions we find here."

*To offer more detail, try this:*
9 out of 10 organic apples sold in the US come from western Washington, because the national organic standards work well for tree fruit in a drier climate. Here, we have more rain, more species of damaging insects, and twice as many diseases

that threaten our trees. EcoCertified has more effective ways of addressing the problems in this region. It lets us grow the fruit varieties that can only grow here in a sustainable way, and locally.

## Do you use pesticides?

"Every farm needs ways to protect their crops from being damaged by diseases, insects, or animals. So like every other grower, we take steps to manage these threats. For the most part, we rely on treating our farm like a holistic ecosystem. We focus on building up healthy soil and healthy levels of beneficial wildlife and insects because that keeps our plants healthy, too.

We never spray pesticides just to kill off anything that might be lurking. And we always use the least-toxic, least-risky option that will be effective in a particular situation. Usually that's a non-chemical option.

Sometimes we do apply chemicals to ward off diseases, insects, or plants that could harm the crop. When we do this, it's always because we believe it's the most responsible way to handle the problem."

Inside the CommSci:

This answer starts with the basic background. It replaces the vague, catch-all term "pests" with "diseases, insects, and animals," everyday nouns that people can easily visualize. It helps people see that a commitment to the environment and appropriate use of chemical pesticides can be compatible – without sounding defensive about it.

# Do you spray?

Good question. Long answer. Got a second?

[Short version - If they say they are in a hurry]

We never default to spraying pesticides just to kill off anything that might be lurking. And we always use the least-toxic, least-risky option that will be effective in a particular situation. For the most part, we rely on natural controls and growing practices that prevent disease. But sometimes we do apply chemicals to ward off diseases, insects, or plants that could harm the crop. When we do this, it's always because we believe it's the most responsible way to handle the problem. We use the smallest amount that will be effective, and we stand by the safety of the fruit we sell.

[Longer version - if they say they have time]

If you're worried about whether we grow our crops in ways that protect the environment, ourselves and, our workers, and you - I think you've come to the right place. We care about those things too.

We grow according to an ecological standard called EcoCertified. This strict environmental standard was designed for tree fruit growers in the Northeast, so it's a good choice for us.

Here in the Northeast, the weather, plant diseases, and insect varieties make the USDA organic standard unworkable for orchards that produce enough for grocery stores, which is how our farm and most farms stay in business.

EcoCertified practices have a lot in common with other environmentally-friendly farming approaches. We treat the farm as a holistic ecosystem and focus on building up healthy soil and healthy levels of beneficial wildlife and insects because that keeps our plants healthy, too. We use lots of different creative and scientifically-proven strategies to prevent plant diseases and harmful insects from damaging our plants in the first place.

We never default to spraying pesticides just to kill off anything that might be lurking. And we always use the least-toxic, least-risky option that will be effective in a particular situation. Usually that's a non-chemical option.

Sometimes we do apply substances to ward off diseases, insects, or plants that could harm the crop. When we do this, it's always because we believe it's the most responsible way to handle the problem. We always use the smallest amount that will be effective and we stand by the safety of the fruit we sell.

# About this Toolkit

To develop this toolkit, social scientists from the FrameWorks Institute teamed up with farming and food experts from Red Tomato to learn more about the communications challenges facing orchards in the northeastern United States. We interviewed orchard owners and managers and visited orchards to observe interactions between orchard staff and pick-your-own visitors to figure out the opportunities to build in more interaction and spark more science-rich conversations about growing great crops. We relied on insights from the Farming and Food Narrative Project to develop the strategies, sample messages, and other practical tools for orchard communicators found in this toolkit.

This project was supported by a grant from NESARE (Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education). Its contents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the US Department of Agriculture.