



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 market.

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 reading “A Note for the Farm Manager” or watching “Why Talk to Visitors About Agriculture.” These pieces are designed to orient toolkit users.

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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.

These tools contain reframed language that can be built into your website copy, your newsletters, or your signage to more effectively engage with your customers and visitors. 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 conversations about agriculture's complexity and nuance that builds the understanding of the general public.

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. If you want to work more with Red Tomato on applying tools, please reach out info@redtomato.org.

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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 Framing Farming is Important](#)

Why it's important to think about the language we use when talking about farming.

[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.

Staff Training Video

[Orchard Eco Staff Training](#)

This presentation is a tool for visitor-facing orchard staff. In this video, we share some background information about Red Tomato and EcoCertified. We also share helpful tips on how to speak to farm visitors about the EcoCertified program.

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:

“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 trained in communicating EcoCertified more approachable with pins, shirts, or aprons that invite questions. *Options:* “Ask me about EcoCertified” or “Bee Squad: Ask me how we protect pollinators!”

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3. Posters

Use your walls to build understanding of ecological growing practices. Red Tomato's “This is How We Farm” poster series is a great way to invite visitors into the nuance of your farming practices and encourage them to get interested in learning more. Ask RT's Marketing Department about the growing collection of posters.

These are some additional generalized free posters to download and print:

IPM UCANR: [Natural Enemies Poster](#)

USDA Forestry Service: [Eastern Bumble Bees](#)

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 resources that visitors can take with them. Consider using a QR code that sends visitors to your website to reduce the use of paper.

The EcoCertified Promise poster and card (available in English and [Spanish](#)) is a great resource to use in your orchard and your farm/market stand to begin the conversation: [Eco Promise Poster](#).

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 two independent nonprofit organizations. 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 soils in order to promote the growth of strong, healthy trees and fruit. 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 in ways that work here.”

Preventative

“We actively care for and manage our trees year ‘round to keep them healthy. From winter pruning to proper orchard floor maintenance, 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 gained over generations of farming, while reaching toward the future 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 mating disruption.

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 the development of all the fruits we grow on our farm. Without pollinators, we would only be able to grow a few wind-pollinated plants, like corn or wheat.

In our ecosystem, pollinators include honeybees and bumble bees and other native insects, as well as birds, bats, and butterflies. The pollinators benefit the orchard by helping the trees to bear fruit, and the orchard benefits the pollinators by providing a habitat with food and places to reproduce. We all work together.

One of the many things we do to protect pollinators is to refrain from all activity relating to insect damage management when apple blossoms are open. This is when pollinators do their critical work and are drinking up nectar. When bees are visiting flowers, they may also drink in any treatment we apply to trees.

We take many steps to prevent the need for treatments, but diseases like powdery mildew and black spot are common challenges 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 and removing diseased plant parts from the orchard.

Sometimes the stuff that causes disease gets into the orchard anyway. When conditions that encourage disease occur, 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 tree buds are first opening, that's our cue to begin watching the weather for indications that serious disease conditions are coming. If we see weather conditions are just right for a disease to get started, that lets us catch it and apply the treatment before pollinators start visiting our trees!

Inside the Communication Science

- 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.
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Bait and See

(Pheromone monitoring and mating disruption for codling moth)

“Every farm must protect its crops against diseases and insects. One insect that’s common in our area is the codling moth. Codling moth was originally an invasive insect but has been in North America for so long that it has become common throughout the landscape. Its young feed on the fruit of many different trees and, like us, they love apples. Codling moth young tunnels through the fruit, all the way to the seeds in the center. Their tunneling in the fruit leaves darkened tracks in the otherwise white fleshed fruit. To a consumer, these look like unsightly scars reminiscent of barren tunnels left behind by mining operations. To a grower, they look like a major risk: codling moth can ruin a crop quickly.

We use special pheromone baited sticky traps to keep an eye on population levels of codling moths in the orchard. The traps look a little like open ended tents in the apple trees. We put cards coated with an all-natural mixture of oils, resin, and wax inside the tents. The sticky stuff is called tanglefoot because it traps insects permanently on the cards. We check the traps regularly. When we catch five adult moths, then we know we need to treat the trees. The other benefit of using baited traps is they allow us to confidently identify the insects trying to damage our fruit. In this case, we have determined that codling moth is the issue. This enables us to deploy mating disruption confidently next year. Mating disruption dispensers (typically these are little twist ties that have been infused with female pheromone) are hung in the orchard prior to trap captures and are intended to confuse male moths who come into the orchard looking for a female to mate with. The confused males are not able to successfully mate, therefore, no baby moths are in the orchard to cause damage to the fruit.

This “bait and see” method helps us avoid using chemical insecticides if we don’t have to. When it’s the most responsible option, 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 Communication Science

- 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.

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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.

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

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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 works 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.

Here in the Northeast, the weather, plant diseases, and insect species 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.”

Inside the Communication Science:

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.

Inside the Communication Science:

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.

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 nonchemical 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 Communication Science:

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

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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. For more background information on navigating complex conversations about farming, we recommend reading the following FFNP reports:

[*The Landscape of Public Thinking About Farming: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understanding*](#) (2019). This updated report maps the gaps in understanding of food and farming in the United States between the public and experts in the field.

[*Understanding the Conversation about Farming: An Analysis of Media and Field Communications*](#) (2020). This report offers a deep and comprehensive examination of field and media communications, which inform public thinking about food and farming practices.

[*Reframing Farming: Strategies for Expanding Thinking About Agriculture*](#) (2022). Examining and changing the way we talk about agriculture can help shift the way society understands it, leading to more productive conversations and contexts that shape both grower and consumer decision-making. The framing strategies described in this document can help build deeper understanding of farming practices, counter oversimplified thinking, and boost support for farming practices that work in harmony with other goals.

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