Fruit Cross Visit Report

Challenges in conversion to organic in apple and cherry

SWITZERLAND, FRICK

13-14 August 2025

The 2-day event focused on the organic cultivation of dessert apples and cherries. In addition to theoretical input on the legal and regulatory framework of Swiss organic farming and the basics of organic fruit growing, participants were able to gain concrete insights into the challenges, solutions and management strategies of modern organic fruit farms through thematic presentations by the FiBL fruit growing team and two visits to nearby fruit farms. Each visit lasted about 2.5h, leaving enough room for questions of the participants to the farmer.

Figure 1: The group consisted of participants from various European countries: Hungary, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Austria. The first company visit was to Christian Vogt, a core fruit producer and storekeeper.

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Field visit 1 on apple production and storage

Christian Vogt operates an organic apple orchard of approximately 15 hectares in Remigen, Switzerland, cultivating over 30 apple varieties. The farm integrates production with on-site washing, sorting, packing, and controlled-atmosphere storage, allowing apples to be supplied year-round to retailers. The business model relies on varietal diversity to manage market timing, risk, and storage suitability, while maintaining high-quality organic standards.

Organic apple production at this scale faces several key challenges. Climatic variability and heavy soils require careful management, including compost-based fertilization to maintain soil health and resilience towards diseases. Pest control is more demanding in organic systems; the farm uses pheromone-based mating disruption to prevent codling moth infestations, which can otherwise damage a large portion of the crop. Post-harvest storage adds complexity, as apples require precise timing, temperature, humidity, and low-oxygen atmospheres to maintain quality, and storage capacity limits can constrain the ability to sell throughout the year. Harvesting is labor-intensive and must occur within narrow windows to ensure optimal fruit quality.

Overall, the case illustrates that successful organic apple production depends on precise orchard management, integrated post-harvest handling, and careful coordination of storage and marketing to overcome environmental, pest, and operational challenges.

Figure 2: At Christian Vogt's farm, participants were able to gain insights into a business with its own infrastructure for storing, sorting and packing fruit.

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Field visit 2 on stone fruit production (cherry, apricot, plum)

Bruno Wirth's Biohof Wirth, an organic farm in Olsberg, Switzerland, dedicates five hectares to the cultivation of stone fruits, including cherries, plums, and apricots. The farm specializes in high-quality organic production, with apricots being particularly delicate due to their susceptibility to frost and diseases. To achieve optimal flavor, apricots are harvested fully ripe, which enhances taste but necessitates rapid sale because of their limited shelf life. The farm emphasizes direct marketing through multiple channels: a farm shop, a self-service vending machine, an online store, weekly deliveries to local companies, and subscription services for residents in Olsberg and Magden.

Production of stone fruits at Biohof Wirth faces significant challenges. Apricots and cherries are highly sensitive to weather extremes, including frost, rain, and hail, which can damage blossoms or reduce fruit set. Organic disease management is constrained by the limited availability of systemic fungicides, making fungal diseases like brown rot a recurrent threat that requires close monitoring and intensive treatment schedules. Protective infrastructure, such as mesh nets and foil coverings, is used to guard against hail, birds, and adverse weather, but these systems demand substantial investment and complicate orchard management. Harvesting is labor-intensive and time-sensitive, often requiring daily early-morning picking to ensure optimal firmness and quality, particularly for fruits with very short shelf lives. Additionally, the small scale of production and the short harvest window require precise coordination of labor, packing, and sales to maintain quality and meet direct-market commitments.

Overall, Biohof Wirth illustrates that successful organic stone fruit production relies on meticulous orchard management, intensive disease and weather protection measures, precise harvest timing, and agile marketing strategies to deliver high-quality fruit directly to consumers while managing the inherent vulnerabilities of delicate stone fruit crops.

Figure 3: During a visit to Bruno Wirth's stone fruit farm, the farm manager showed participants the challenges he faces and his approaches to solving them in apricot, cherry and plum cultivation.

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‘We need to collaborate’

For Renske Petré from Belgium, the benefits of the event were worth the long train journey: ‘We need to work together,’ she emphasised. Despite regional differences, many of the challenges faced by farms are similar – this is particularly evident in organic farming. She sees advice as a key factor in the decision to convert. In the Belgian region of Flanders, the proportion of organic farms is currently only around three per cent. Petré considers deep-seated uncertainties regarding various aspects of organic farming, such as plant protection and regulations, to be the main inhibiting factor. ‘Producers need advice,’ she states quite simply. Even exchanging information at the advisory level is very difficult – in her region, there are currently no other organic advisors in fruit growing with whom she can exchange professional information. This is precisely why exchange is so valuable – across regions, countries and institutions.

Figure 4: Participants were given the opportunity to exchange experiences informally during the social dinner and lunch/coffee breaks.

Lasting impressions

The feedback from the other participants was also similar overall: field visits and exchanges with other advisors were definitely the highlight, and plant protection (disease and pest control) was one of the central topics. The advisors were impressed by some elements of the Swiss system – such as market and price regulations to protect domestic production, direct payments and approaches to promoting robust varieties – which they would also like to see in their own countries. In addition, the practice-oriented research at FiBL and the close exchange with producers proved to be inspiring. Overall, the event enabled participants to make new international contacts. This means that even after the event, they can draw on a valuable network and the expertise of experienced colleagues.

Author

Clémence Boutry, FIBL CH

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