

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

7/26/2012

## The Short Guide to MPS, Veriflora & Food Alliance Labels

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One by one, North American growers have begun pursuing third-party certification, identifying their businesses and plants as “sustainable.” While the number of certified growers in North America isn’t huge, glancing through the list of companies provides an impressive slice of Who’s Who in the horticulture industry. The best we can figure, based on the names provided to us, is that at least 13% of the largest growers in the country are currently certified. Eight years ago, that number was zero.

So what does it cost? Is it legitimate? What are the benefits? And which one do you choose?

Let’s start with the basics.

### The players

**Veriflora:** A sustainability label that caters to cut flowers and potted ornamentals, this standard was developed by Scientific Certification Systems, which specializes in third-party certifications for dozens of industries.

**MPS:** The MPS-ABC sustainability label is just one of many labels MPS has developed for the floriculture industry. Based in the Netherlands, it certifies flower growers around the world.

**The Food Alliance:** In May 2012, the Food Alliance introduced a new certification for greenhouse and nursery operations. It is a 501(c)3 nonprofit and certifies some 320 agricultural operations for sustainable management. The standard was developed with input from the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

**USDA Organic:** Even though this isn’t really a sustainability standard in that it doesn’t look at measures such as energy consumption, employee safety, water and so on, this label plays a large role in food production certifications. We’ve included a few tidbits of available information in this article because it’s an important certification for those in edibles.

## Inspections & data

**Food Alliance:** During inspection, growers need to provide records that allow inspectors to verify active and responsible management of environmental and human resources (e.g., IPM records for scouting, monitoring and pesticide application; safety trainings; energy, water and waste bills). Growers seeking certification must meet minimum thresholds in five areas: soil and water conservation; wildlife habitat and biodiversity conservation; adaptive management of pests, diseases and weeds (IPM); safe and fair working conditions; and operational efficiencies (energy use, recycling, etc.). Information reviewed at the initial inspection establishes a baseline. Data/metrics are used at subsequent inspections to verify improvements over time. You're required to set goals and demonstrate progress towards continual improvement.

**MPS:** It uses a sustainability scorecard based on the registration of how you use crop protection agents, fertilizers, energy, water and recycling. Participants must register the accumulated use per category every four weeks. This means you submit 13 times per year, using a digital program called MPS-ACTRES. This program has been individualized for North America and uses the U.S. Imperial measurement system. Growers are benchmarked to other (national and international) growers with the same crop.

**Veriflora:** Annually, you submit crop production area and annual yield, agrochemical use, water use, energy use, waste disposal and recycling records. It also looks at employee and community relations, and product quality. Certification is achieved through implementation of corrective actions in response to any non-conformities issued in the audit report. The certification decision is rendered by SCS after a review of a self-assessment workbook, the audit report, and corrective actions and evidence submitted.

## The cost

**Food Alliance:** Growers pay an inspection fee and a licensing fee. The annual licensing fee is based on a percentage of the company's gross annual sales, and is capped at \$5,000 per year. Sales less than \$100,000 have a \$100 flat fee. The fee on additional sales from \$100,000 to \$1,000,000 is 0.1%. The fee on additional sales over \$1,000,000 is 0.05%. The inspection fee (every three years) for nursery operations is the actual cost of inspection (inspector's time plus travel expense), plus an administrative fee. However, in 2012, there's a special deal, and nurseries signing up for certification receive half off their annual licensing fee for the first three-year term of their certification.

**MPS:** All growers pay a basic fee of about \$ 2,500 per year (independent of size). Besides the basic fee, participants also pay a variable fee, which is connected to the area in cultivation (size of the greenhouse or field). For greenhouses, MPS calculates approximately \$100 per hectare (about 2.2 acres). In a field, it's about \$30 per hectare. For the variable fee, the maximum is set at \$1,000. The fee includes free access to the digital registration tool, MPS-ACTRES; one start-up visit by a regional coordinator; access to MPS's help desk; four qualifications on a yearly basis; and all costs in relation to the initial, regular and desk audits (including travel and overnight stay of auditor).

**Veriflora:** The cost of the audit is inclusive of all preparation, auditor time and travel, the annual audit report, certificate maintenance and technical support related to certification throughout the year. Fees are determined based upon size and complexity of the operation, and the management system in place. All charges are based on time and materials. Initial certification fees start at approximately \$3,400 with additional variation based upon acreage, auditor travel, time and auditor day rate. Administrative fees, such

as audit planning, technical report review, certification review, client support, program administration, are included in the cost of certification. There are no separate licensing fees. Annual certification renewal fees are assessed to cover the costs of renewal desk and field audits, and typically run about one-half to two-thirds of the initial year costs.

## The bottom line

In a lot of ways, the three sustainability labels are similar, though each goes about measuring things differently. Any grower thinking about signing up would be wise to thoroughly investigate each option, consider their own business model and question what they hope to achieve in the process.

Learning to be sustainable—label or no label—is as much about scrutinizing everyday details as it is about big, lofty goals.

### SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATIONS

Organization	Labels Offered	Crops Certified	Additional Notes
Food Alliance	Food Alliance Certified (Nursery/Greenhouse)	Cuts, container-grown ornamentals, vegetable starts, harvested vegetables, nursery stock, greenhouse crops, field crops	They do not yet certify hydroponics, Christmas trees or tree farms.
MPS	MPS ABC (sustainability), MPS GAP (good agricultural practices), MPS SQ (people practices), MPS Florimark TraceCert/Good Trade Practices	Ornamentals, bedding/potted plants, cuttings and seedlings, seed, nursery stock, cut flowers, tropical foliage, ferns	In the Netherlands, they have a pilot program for certified fresh fruit and vegetables, which may be rolled out to other countries.
Veriflora	Veriflora Certified Sustainably Grown	Ornamental flowering plants, container-grown ornamentals, plugs and liners, vegetable starts	Also offers "Veriflora Approved Input Materials" listing, including peat moss producers
National Organic Program	USDA Organic	All agricultural crops	Not a comprehensive "sustainability" certification

### CERTIFIED GROWERS

Label	Certifying in North America since	# Certified Growers in N.A.	Certifying Internationally?	# International Certifications
Food Alliance	May 2012	1 pending	No	n/a
MPS-ABC	2007	33	Yes, since 1994	72 in Latin America and 3,425 worldwide
Veriflora	2004	30	Yes, since 2004	21 in Latin America

### THE DO-NOT-USE LISTS

Label	Prohibited Chemical List	Prohibited Input Materials List
Food Alliance	Yes (includes all Class Ia and Ib* chemicals on the World Health Organization list, with exceptions for materials required by law or required for export)	Yes (GMO planting materials)
MPS-ABC	Yes (MPS list, reviewed twice a year)	No
USDA Organic	Yes (extensive)	Yes (extensive)
Veriflora	Yes (includes all Class Ia and Ib* chemicals on the World Health Organization list, plus phaseout of EPA Class A, B1 and B2 and those that are "ecotoxic")	Yes (GMO planting materials)

\*Ia and Ib chemicals are pesticides classified as extremely or highly hazardous, according to the 2009 World Health Organization (WHO) Recommended Classification of Pesticides by Hazard.

## INSPECTIONS & RENEWAL

Certification	On-site Inspections	Data Submission	Method of Evaluation	Renewal
Food Alliance	Once every three years	Annual submission of forms	Point system	Every three years
MPS	First audit occurs after one year of registering data. Every year after that, 33% of participants are randomly audited on location.	Every four weeks	Point system with grades of A, B, C	Four times per year
USDA Organic	Annual onsite audits	Annual	Adherence to regulations	Annual
Veriflora	Annual onsite audits	Annual submission of forms	Based on audit report and corrective actions	Every three years

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## Why Get Certified?

Getting certified as a sustainable or organic grower is an investment of time and money, and while it may add value to your product, we aren't exactly seeing growers charging a premium because their plants are certified. So why do it?

It's a complex answer. But here are some of the reasons we heard:

- The perception of quality. Some growers see certification as a way of standing out to their retailers, proving they provide the highest-quality brand possible.
- To tell their story. They want consumers to know and value the environmental programs they've implemented.
- To benchmark production practices.
- To reduce operating costs.
- To get a clearer picture of management decisions and improve the bottom line.
- To establish a clear path to improving their operations. Many growers comment that it's like having a consultant come into their business to suggest changes and monitor outcomes.
- To improve efficiencies and make the business more sustainable for the future.
- Retailers are asking suppliers for information on sustainability efforts.
- Retailers are demanding certification, or indicate the possibility of a requirement down the road. In the U.S., Shopko already requires plant suppliers to be Veriflora certified. Internationally, MPS has seen several retailers require that plant suppliers get certified.
- The added marketing backup of the label. Veriflora reports its clients get individual marketing support for branding the certification to clients and consumers via press, co-op ads and in-person events. It also does media relations in both trade and consumer publications, with advertising around major flower holidays. Food Alliance also provides limited marketing to retailers and consumers.
- To demonstrate industry leadership.
- To enhance community relations.
- To enhance employee relations and foster company pride.
- It's the right thing to do.

After David Kirwan recorded three months of data for Phoenix Foliage, a division of ForemostCo, and reviewed his initial MPS qualification, he said, "It's good what [MPS] does for the environment and it's even better for the bottom line."

Mike Nehls, owner of Native Grounds Nursery, Brownsville, Oregon, which is en route to becoming the first

certified nursery under the Food Alliance label, notes, “We all can get caught up in the everyday pressures of running our businesses. An independent second set of eyes challenges us to constantly improve, think strategically and eliminate complacency.”

Sandra Hering, who works for MPS in North America, may have summed it up best: “As an industry, we cannot sit on the sidelines of the sustainability question, waiting for retailers and consumers to ask questions regarding our sustainability or certifications. We should be working to create answers to such questions and document our track records with a database of the facts, which demonstrate our improvements and our sincerity on the issues of our sustainability.” **GT**

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To learn more about any of these certifications, please contact the organizations directly.

**Veriflora**

SCS Certified

[www.veriflora.com](http://www.veriflora.com)

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[Foodalliance.org/nursery](http://Foodalliance.org/nursery)

**USDA Organic**

[www.ams.usda.gov/nop/](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/)