

The potato covenant, a successful model for transition of the organic potato market into a more sustainable system

In 2017, 28 organic potato breeders, growers and retailers signed the covenant 'Accelerated transition to robust potato varieties'. With this covenant, the Dutch organic sector wants to give a sustainable answer to the most devastating potato disease: Phytophthora.

The direct reason for the covenant was the large-scale damage late blight caused in 2016 in the organic potato cultivation. Potatoes are sensitive to phytophthora and natural pesticides for fungal disease are missing. The use of copper as a crop protection product is not allowed in the Netherlands. Many organic farmers said they would no longer grow organic potatoes unless they could use resistant varieties. To prevent a new large damage by phytophthora, a growth in the availability of resistant varieties is necessary. To speed up the market introduction of these varieties, the covenant partners agreed to give robust varieties priority in production of breeds and seed potatoes, in the cultivation and in the shops. The aim is to scale up to 100% of robust organic potatoes in 2020.

Robust potato varieties

Within the covenant all varieties that are resistant to Phytophthora and varieties that mature early in the season (before the annual Phytophthora outbreak) are considered robust. In 2020 there are around 22 robust potato varieties on the Dutch market.

The covenant partners

- The chain organization Bionext, with its members Biohuis (farmers), BioNederland (processors and traders) and the Association of Organic shops.
- The retailers: Albert Heijn, Jumbo Supermarkets, Ekoplaza/Udea, Natudis, Estafette Odin B.V., Superunie, ALDI and Lidl
- The organizations of the organic farmers: Bdeko, Biowad, Association of Bio Farmers South West, Nedato cooperative, Dutch Organic Potato Pool.
- The organic potato breeders: Agrico, HZPC, C. Meijer B.V., Plantera B.V., Den Hartigh, Europlant, Danespo, Caithness Potatoes B.V., Fam Vos, Carel Bouma organic breeding B.V. and branch association Plantum.

Main activities

- Each year 3 demonstration fields with all the robust varieties are demonstrated and visited by farmers and covenant partners
- Possible damage by Phytophthora is monitored, and investigated in Wageningen University
- Cooking and baking tests of the robust varieties
- Factsheets about resistance management are spread and practical instructions are offered to the farmers
- Annual meeting with all the partners of the covenant
- Cooperation with the Louis Bolk Institute and the Bio-Impuls breeding project
- Cooperation with the Covenant partners in Belgium
- Communication about the results through interviews, workshops etc

Results

- In 2019, 22 robust organic potato varieties were on the market
- In 2019, 70% of the harvested organic potatoes in the Netherlands were from robust varieties
- Retailers estimate that in 2020 between 80% and 100% of their organic table potatoes will be robust
- In 2018 a similar covenant was signed in Flanders and Wallonia

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