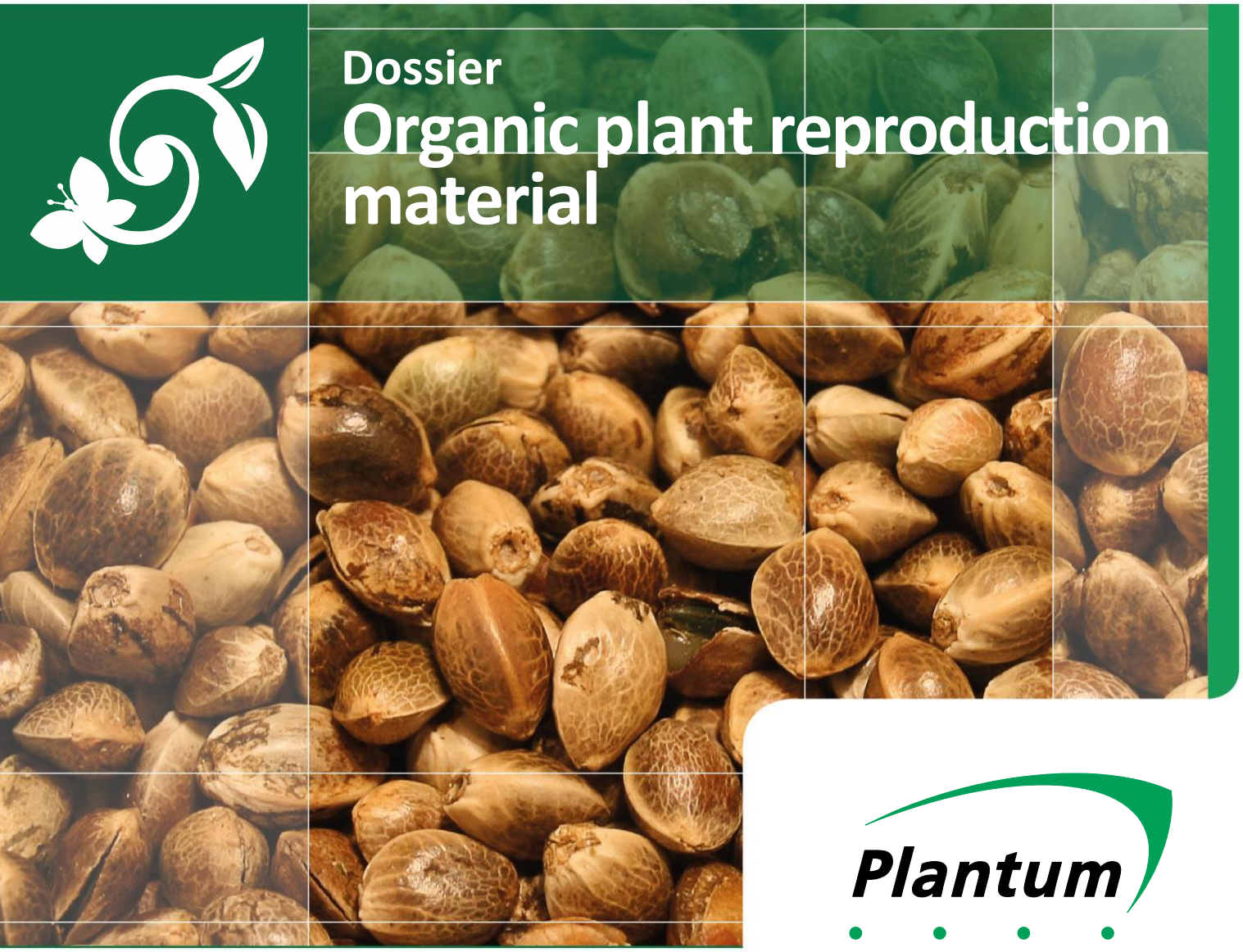
Dossier

Organic plant reproduction material



Plantum

Heading towards the new EU regulation

The Netherlands is an important producer and exporter of organic seeds and young plants. There is strong growth in the global market for organic products and this is also creating increased demand for organic plant reproductive material. Furthermore, the European Union has been working on the development of a new regulation governing organic production and labelling for a number of years now. According to that regulation, from 2035 onwards seeds and young plants may only be used in organic production if they themselves have been organically produced.

In other words, it is important to ensure the continued market availability of sufficient organically produced plant reproductive materials. There is an added advantage of breeding for the organic sector: the non-organic sector stands to benefit too. After all, knowledge and resistances developed in breeding activities for organic farming can help to improve sustainability in the entire agriculture and horticulture industry.

To expand the availability of organic plant reproductive materials, Plantum calls for the new European regulation for organic production and labelling to be clear and unambiguous, with as few exceptions as possible.

Dutch companies make an important contribution to the worldwide success of the organic sector. Approximately three percent of all vegetable seeds and young plants from the Netherlands are utilised in organic production. A handful of the country's 250-plus breeding and propagation companies sell exclusively to organic growers, but most of the companies who sell to organic producers also supply to non-organic customers.

Some organic growers only use seeds that have been produced organically, but others also utilise seeds that have been produced by non-organic methods. That is permissible, as long as the seeds have not undergone chemical treatment.

New regulation

The European Union has been working on the development of a new regulation governing organic production and labelling for a number of years now, and the final draft will be voted in the European parliament in April 2018. If agreed on by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, the regulation will come into force in 2021. There is still some uncertainty about the consequences of the new European regulation at national level, both for the organic sector and for seed suppliers to that sector.

European database

One aspect of the new regulation is to gain an overview of all the organic plant reproductive material that is available. Each EU member state must keep a database so that organic growers from all over Europe can find out for which crops they can obtain organic seeds or young plants, and where. This is a big step forwards because it will make it easier for organic growers to source organic plant reproductive materials. Without this knowledge, organic growers will continue to work with non-organic seeds (sometimes unnecessarily) while producers of organic seeds are sometimes (also unnecessarily) left with unsold stock. Organic growers are currently still permitted to use seeds produced by non-organic methods, but if the database system works well it will be possible to abolish this exemption in 2035.

Unambiguous

Plantum calls for the new European regulation to be clear and unambiguous, with as few exceptions as possible. The regulation should be ambitious, but it must also be realistic and feasible. Rules that impose limitations on organic seed companies could reduce the availability of plant reproductive materials. One example of this is the European Union's decision about which breeding methods are suitable for the organic sector. Organic currently accounts for 6% of all European agriculture and horticulture. If the rules and regulations are too strict and exclude too many methods, this percentage could decline.

Private labels

Some organisations in the organic sector choose to work with stricter rules than are necessary by law – e.g. they stipulate that the seed must have been organically produced in every generation of the cross-breeding process rather than in the most recent generation only, or that the production of the plant reproductive materials must comply with additional criteria, such as that no hybrids may have been used. The organisations often convey these additional criteria through private labels.

Further market segmentation increases the workload for breeding companies and can result in higher costs for organic growers. Despite this, individual members of Plantum sometimes agree to comply with the non-mandatory requirements placed on plant reproductive materials in order to focus on specific niche markets.

Knock-on effects for non-organic production

The development of varieties for the organic sector also generates valuable information for non-organic growers. After all, they also stand to benefit from robust varieties that require less artificial fertiliser, for instance, or fewer crop protection agents. Trials of varieties under organic conditions support non-organic breeding activities too, thus helping to improve the sustainability of the whole agriculture and horticulture industry. For Plantum this is an additional reason to call for investment to increase the availability of organic plant reproductive materials.

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Plantum is the Dutch association of companies that produce and trade plant reproductive material. The companies are active in plant breeding, propagation, cultivation and trade of seeds, bulbs, tubers, cuttings and young plants of agricultural and horticultural crops.