What requirements must fresh fruit or vegetables comply with to be allowed on the European market?

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The European fruit and vegetable market is very competitive. You need to meet multiple requirements if you want to export to this market. These requirements are either mandatory, set by European regulations, or private, requested by buyers. Private requirements are referred to as certifications. Almost all the certifications on the European market are social and environmental in nature. Their main goal is to protect European consumers. Some certifications are more specific to niche markets.

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1. What are mandatory requirements?

Mandatory requirements cover food safety and quality. These requirements change regularly. You can find an up-to-date list of these requirements on My Trade Assistant of Access2Markets. 'Access2Market' is an EU website that contains key information about the requirements that apply to your product. To access information about your product, enter the product name and the country you are exporting from.

Please note that from 1 January to 31 December 2023, some tariff preferences that have been granted to GSP (Generalised Scheme of Preferences) beneficiary countries will be suspended. You can consult Suspension for the year 2023 of certain tariff preferences granted to certain GSP beneficiary countries for more details.

Limited use of pesticides

The EU regularly updates the list Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs) of pesticides it allows in food products. You can access the list of pesticides you are allowed to use on the website of the Directorate General of Health and Food Safety.

Bear in mind you should only apply plant protection products (PPPs) that are allowed in your country. Using unauthorised products or PPPs designated for crops other than the one you are growing can result in rejection. You can find complementary information on the PPPs allowed in your country on the Cabi BioProtection Portal.

MRLs are enforced through European Directives. This means some EU member states can apply stricter rules than European legislation requires them to. Supermarket chains in the Netherlands, Austria and Germany are known to apply stricter MRLs. This is also true of exports to the United Kingdom.

In case of excess MRLs, the first importer of a product can be held legally responsible. This is why increasing numbers of buyers will ask you to keep records of the PPPs you use and for your spraying records.

Thanks to the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF), information about products with excessive pesticide levels can be rapidly shared among EU member states' control bodies. This means the products can be withdrawn from markets. The RASFF Annual Report 2020 shows the importance of checking food products' conformity with MRLs.

Imidacloprid

The use of neonicotinoid-class products is of growing concern in the EU. Imidacloprid is an active substance contained in some insecticides used in mango production to control a wide range of pests. EU permission for this active substance expired in July 2022 and was not renewed.

Tips:

Use the EU Pesticide Database to find the relevant MRLs for your products. You can select your product or pesticide, and the database will show the list of associated MRLs. Always check whether your buyers have additional requirements for MRLs and pesticides.

GLOBALG.A.P. (Good Agricultural Practices) is a private certification used by most producers targeting the EU market. GLOBALG.A.P. promotes a limited use of chemical pesticides and encourages producers to grow their crops in sustainable ways. Buyers appreciate the use of integrated pest management (IPM) systems because they combine different strategies to control pests that are good for the environment without relying on chemicals.

Avoiding contaminants

Foodstuffs can contain contaminants. Contaminants are substances that are not added to food on purpose. They can come from various sources, such as agricultural practices, environmental pollution, packaging, transport and holding. Some contaminants also occur naturally in certain foodstuffs. This is the case with hydrocyanic acid in cassava roots, for instance. The EU refers to these contaminants as 'inherent plant toxins'.

Contaminants can also pose a risk to human health. The EU sets limits for contaminants in foodstuffs (see Table 1), as it does for MRLs. The most common contaminants found in foodstuffs are chemicals, such as heavy metals resulting from the use of pesticides (lead, cadmium), nitrate (mainly in spinach, lettuce and rucola) and perchlorate.

The rules for processed fruit and vegetables (such as dried fruit and juices) may differ. As the regulation is also regularly updated, you must keep yourself up to date. New insights into or threats to food safety and contaminants can always lead to adjustments in the regulations.

Note that the maximum levels for fresh fruit and vegetables, in particular for cadmium, have become more specific after a revised regulation in August 2021 (see Table 1).

Table 1: The current limits for lead and cadmium in fresh fruit and vegetables (January 2022)

Lead:	Maximum level (mg/kg)
• Fruit, excluding cranberries, currants, elderberries and strawberry tree fruit	0.10

• Cranberries, currants, elderberries and strawberry tree fruit	0.20
• Root and tuber vegetables (excluding salsifies, fresh ginger and fresh turmeric), bulb vegetables, flowering brassica, head brassica, kohlrabies, legume vegetables and stem vegetables	0.10
• Leafy brassica, salsify and leafy vegetables (excluding fresh herbs)	0.30
• Fruiting vegetables: sweetcorn	0.10
• Fruiting vegetables excluding sweetcorn	0.05
• Wild fungi, fresh turmeric and fresh ginger	0.80
Cadmium:	Maximum level (mg/kg)
Fruits	
• Citrus fruits, pome fruits, stone fruits, table olives, kiwi fruits, bananas, mangos, papayas and pineapples	0.020
• Berries and small fruits, except raspberries	0.030
• Raspberries	0.040
• Other fruits	0.050
Roots and tubers	
• Radishes	0.020
• Tropical roots and tubers, parsley roots, turnips	0.050
• Beetroots	0.060
• Celeriac	0.15
• Horseradish, parsnips, salsify	0.20
• Other root and tuber vegetables. For potatoes, the maximum level applies to peeled potatoes.	0.10

Bulb vegetables	
• Garlic	0.050
• Bulb vegetables, except garlic	0.030
Fruiting vegetables	
• Aubergines	0.030
• Fruiting vegetables, except aubergines	0.020
Brassica vegetables	
• Leafy brassica	0.10
• Brassica, other than leafy brassica	0.040
Leaf vegetables and herbs	
• Spinaches and similar leaves, mustard seedlings and fresh herbs	0.20
• Other leaf vegetables	0.10
Legume vegetables	0.020
Stem vegetables	
• Leeks	0.040
• Celeries	0.10
• Other stem vegetables	0.030
Nitrate (NO3):	Maximum level (mg/kg)
• Fresh spinach	3500
• Fresh Lettuce (protected and open-grown lettuce)	3,000 or 5,000 (depending on the date of harvest and growing method)

• 'Iceberg' type lettuce	2,000 or 2,500 (depending on the growing method)
• Rucola	6,000 or 7,000 (depending on the date of harvest)
Perchlorate:	Maximum level (mg/kg)
• Cucurbitaceae and kale	0.10
• leaf vegetables and herbs	0.50
• Other fruit and vegetables	0.05

Source: REGULATION (EC) No 1881/2006

Tips:

Maintain good contact with your buyers because they will often keep you up to date with changes in regulation which affect the fresh fruit and vegetables business.

Read more about contaminants on the European Commission website and find an overview of the maximum contaminant levels in the Annex of Regulation (EC) 1881/2006. Try to check this information on an annual basis.

Find out more about preventing and reducing lead contamination in the Code of Practice published by the FAO Codex Alimentarius.

Check the European Commission's fact sheet on food contaminants Managing food contaminants: how the EU ensures that our food is safe.

Microbiological criteria for pre-cut fruit

If you are a supplier of fresh pre-cut fruit and vegetables, you must take measures to control microbiological hazards throughout the processing and packaging process. Microbiological hazards (viruses, parasites and bacteria) can lead to foodborne diseases. European Regulation (EC) No 2073/2005 provides detailed information about sampling and testing procedures, and the microorganisms that are tested for. Salmonella and E. Coli are the 2 most tested for bacteria in pre-cut fresh fruit and vegetables.

Tips:

Developing an HACCP plan is necessary if you want to supply pre-cut fruits and vegetables. Implementing an HACCP plan proves that you have a system that enables you to identify potential food safety hazards and keep them under control. You should also take a look at other certification schemes, such as BRCGS and IFS, which are based on HACCP principles, in the chapter 'What additional requirements do buyers often have?'

You must respect the cold chain when supplying pre-cut fruit and vegetables. If you experienced power cuts during storage, you must inform your buyer.

Plant health and phytosanitary regulations

To export certain plants and plant products to the EU, you need a phytosanitary certificate that guarantees your products are completely free from quarantine pests and practically free from other pests. There are rules about the trade of plants and plant products from non-EU countries to prevent the risk of spreading harmful organisms in Europe.

Your country's plant protection authorities will provide phytosanitary certificates. The certificates guarantee that your exports:

1. Have been inspected properly;
2. Are free from pests – free from quarantine pests and within the requirements for regulated non-quarantine pests and practically free from other pests;
3. Are in line with the phytosanitary requirements laid down in Regulation (EU) 2019/2072.

National Plant Protection Organizations (NPPOs) are the government agencies in charge of implementing and enforcing plant health regulations at country level. NPPOs are established in accordance with the requirements of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). They are the only ones authorised to deliver phytosanitary certificates.

Most fresh fruit and vegetables are subject to health inspections and require phytosanitary certificates prior to shipping.

- Phytosanitary certification is necessary for most fruit and vegetables. You can find these products and their Latin names in Annex XI, Part A and Part B of Regulation (EU) 2019/2072.
- Some exceptions apply and no phytosanitary certification is requested for the following 5 products: pineapples, bananas, coconuts, durian and dates. See Annex XI, Part C of Regulation (EU) 2019/2072.
- Special requirements are needed for many fruit and vegetables originating from outside the European community, including leafy vegetables, potatoes, leaf celery and basil, among other things. Special requirements may include inspections, treatments or declarations that certain pests are absent. Root and tubercle vegetables require an official statement that the consignment or lot does not contain more than 1% of soil and growing medium by net weight. See Annex VII of Regulation (EU) 2019/2072.
- Special requirements for protected zones are in place for certain products and regions, such as onions, carrots, potatoes, grapes (Cyprus) and citrus fruit (Malta). See Annex X of Regulation (EU) 2019/2072.
- Prohibited from entering the European Union: there are rules to avoid the spread of regulated non-quarantine pests (RNQPs) mainly apply to potatoes from certain origins. See Annex VI of Regulation (EU) 2019/2072.

Countries, authorities and exporters that are not prepared for the strict pest control will have difficulties exporting their fruit and vegetables to Europe. As an exporter, you must stay up to date with the rules and work closely with the food safety authority in your country.

Table 2: Overview of EU regulations concerning protective measures against pests

EU plant health regulation	REGULATION (EU) 2016/2031 on protective measures against pests of plants
	REGULATION (EU) 2019/2072 establishes uniform conditions for the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2016/2031 of the European Parliament and the Council, as regards protective measures against pests of plants

Tips:

Keep in mind that your forwarding agent will know what documents your goods need to clear import procedures. Contacting them in advance, to confirm if your goods need a phytosanitary certificate, can save you time and money.

Phytosanitary controls done by your National Plant Protection Organization (NPPO) can take time. You need get in contact with your local authority frequently to confirm the availability of plant health inspectors.

At the beginning of each export campaign to Europe, familiarise yourself with the phytosanitary rules laid out in the regulations (see Table 2) and check if there are any special requirements for your product or origin.

Check if all the details of your phytosanitary certificate are complete and correctly filled in. A model phytosanitary certificate can be found in Annex V of Regulation (EU) 2016/2031.

Marketing standards

You must comply with certain quality standards to export your fruit and vegetables to the EU. EU legislation has evolved and reduced the list of crops subject to specific marketing standards from 36 to 10. If you export one of the products listed below, your commodity must comply with specific classification characteristics (Extra Class, Class I or Class II) and tolerances set for each class product.

The fruit and vegetables subject to specific marketing standards as mentioned in Annex I, Part B of EU Regulation No 543/2011 are provided below:

- Apples
- Citrus fruit
- Kiwi fruit
- Lettuce, curly and broad-leaved endives
- Peaches and nectarines
- Pears
- Strawberries
- Sweet peppers
- Table grapes
- Tomatoes

Every EU member state should have an up-to-date database of traders marketing these commodities. National authorities ensure that random checks are carried out to check that the goods being sold conform with their specific standards. Non-compliant goods may be downgraded or withdrawn from sale.

Fruits and vegetables not covered by specific marketing standards should comply with the general marketing standards (GMS) in Annex I, Part A of EU Regulation No 543/2011 or with the applicable United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) standard.

The GMS only sets minimum requirements for quality and maturity. It does not give indications about the product's classification, tolerances or sizes.

Fruit and vegetables not covered by a specific standard will be checked against the existing UNECE standard, providing the packaging indicates classification, size or labelling provisions. Controlling authorities assume that the exporter has implicitly chosen the UNECE by using any one of the provisions.

Every EU Member State has an inspection body responsible for carrying out conformity checks at each stage of marketing. The conformity check is to ensure that marketed goods comply with the marketing standards. An example of a certificate of conformity can be found in Annex III to EU Regulation No 543/2011.

Marketing standards can be viewed as communication tools. When you accept a standard to apply, you agree on a certain type of quality with your buyer. To improve the understanding of existing standards, organisations like as the UNECE and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have developed explanatory brochures and documents.

You can also check the Codex Alimentarius (FAO database) for standards on less conventional fruit and vegetables.

Pictures of defects or tolerances can help you better understand what your buyer is expecting and how you can provide the right product to him. The OECD Fruit and Vegetables Scheme has developed 31 explanatory brochures, see for instance the OECD brochure on mangos.

The UNECE has also developed a series of explanatory brochures and posters, to harmonise the interpretation of its standards; see for instance the explanatory brochure developed for pineapples.

The quality inspectorates of a few 'Third countries' (Switzerland, Morocco, South Africa, Israel, India, New Zealand, Senegal, Kenya and Tukey) listed in ANNEX IV, have been authorised by the EU to carry out their own conformity checks on fruits exported from their countries to Europe.

Imports of products intended for processing are not subject to compliance with the EU marketing standards. However, they must be clearly marked on the packaging with the words 'intended for processing' or other equivalent wording.

Tips:

General marketing standards are the minimum requirements your products need to comply with to be accepted on the European market. Bear in mind that your competitors will likely already supply products that are of better quality than required by the general marketing standards. It is also best to aim for higher quality than required by the general marketing standard.

Before accepting quality specifications that will bind you to your buyer by contract, you should look at explanatory brochures (UNECE, OECD) about your product. They can be a good way to understand your buyer's expectations regarding quality.

The EU market is very competitive so only export your best quality products. Otherwise, you could lose money owing to freight costs.

Inform your buyer of all your shortcomings (in terms of volume, size and quality) before export. This could help them take corrective measures and find a better market for your products.

Control of food imported in the European Union

To confirm that your products are of good quality and free from harmful organisms, they are submitted to compulsory tests at their entry point or during the marketing process (see Annex XI, Part C of Regulation (EU) 2019/2072). This regulation establishes how controls of plant and plant products are treated to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements. Annex XI indicates that these controls can include:

- Checking phytosanitary certificates and documents;
- Physical checks to ensure that consignments are free from harmful organisms;
- Identity checks to ensure that the consignment corresponds with certification;
- Inspections to ensure that consignments are free from harmful organisms.

EU countries collect a fee for the documentary, identity and plant health checks, to be paid by the importer or their customs representative. This fee is usually settled with the account of sales and final payment of the buyer.

The traceability of products is compulsory and defined by the General Food Law Regulation. It is an important element of food safety requirements determined by the EU as it:

- Affects importers who need to be able to identify who exported the product in the country of origin;
- Facilitates the withdrawal of faulty food/feed from the market;
- Obliges businesses to be able to identify at least the immediate supplier of the product in question and the immediate subsequent recipient, with the exception of retailers and final consumers.

To fulfil these obligations, you must document the sources of your product and be able to provide proof of origin for all fruits and vegetables. Proof of origin is also necessary for importers to get beneficiary tariffs that are common for imports from developing countries with a Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP).

Figure 1: Label with a traceability code on a pack of oranges

Source: ICI Business

Failure to follow the right procedures could decrease and delay orders, increase costs and result in actions by European enforcement authorities.

Make sure that the accompanying documents (such as a Bill of Lading) correspond exactly to the food products contained in the consignment, including indicated volumes and weight, classes and sizes, number of pallets and boxes. Check the documents needed for customs clearance in the European Union Access2Markets tool.

Check out the Factsheet on Food Traceability of the European Commission.

Labelling and packaging

Food placed on the EU market must meet the legislation on food labelling. Trade packages and cartons of fresh fruit or vegetables must mention the following particulars:

- Name and address of the packer or dispatcher;
- Name and variety of the produce (if the produce is not visible from the outside of the packaging);
- Country of origin;
- Class and size (referring to the marketing standards);
- Lot number for traceability or GGN if certified GLOBALG.A.P. (recommended);
- Official control mark to replace name and address of the packer (optional);
- Post-harvest treatment; for example, anti-moulding agents added in a post-harvest treatment of citrus fruits must be mentioned on the trade package;
- Organic certification, including name of inspection body and certification number (if applicable).

Figure 2: Example of printed packaging for export

Figure 3: Example of an export label

Source: ICI Business

When fruit or vegetables are processed or directly packed for consumption, you must include appropriate labelling for consumers:

- Common name of the product;
- Full name of the country of origin;
- Name and address of the producer, packer, importer, brand owner or seller (retailer) in the EU who places the product on the market, and the wording 'Packed for' (if applicable);
- Net content in weight;
- Minimum durability – a best-before date (on all processed fruit and vegetables);
- Producer identification or lot number;
- List of ingredients (if applicable), including additives and post-harvest treatment;
- Allergenic declaration (if applicable);
- Declaration of nutritional value (when mixed with other foodstuffs);
- Packed in protective atmosphere, if applicable;
- Additional information about quality class, size, variety or commercial type and post-harvest treatment on the product labelling or in close proximity (on the shelf) for products with specific marketing standards.

Figures 4 and 5: Examples of freshly cut fruit
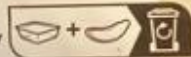
Ingrédient : Mangue

A conserver entre 0°C et 4°C

Conditionné pour Blue Skies Holdings pour Interdis.

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Figure 6: Example of pre-packaged avocados

The European Union (EU) requires that the text on the label must be written in one of the official languages of an EU Member State and be understandable for the consumer.

Packaging marketed within Europe must comply with the general requirements and specific provisions. These aim at protecting the environment and preventing any risk to the health of consumers. The packaging must protect the product against contamination, leakage and dehydration. Also pay attention to your buyer's preference for presentation, such as individual wrapping or sortation (for example, one side up). Products and packaging should be uniform.

In the future, you can expect stricter regulations on the use of plastic in packaging. The new EU Directive 2019/904 on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment already intends to limit the use of single-use plastics by transferring the cost of waste and responsibility to the producer. With the European strategy for plastics, more and more buyers will demand alternative and environmentally friendly packaging.

Tips:

Inadequate labelling can lead to fines and recalls. If your importer is forced to relabel boxes to avoid a fine, they could ask for you to pay for the extra labour. The cost of labour in Europe is more expensive than in developing countries, so this could prove quite expensive.

Good quality cartons are essential to ensure your products are marketed correctly. Poor-quality boxes can often lead to the loss of boxes at the base of a pallet. You and your partners will lose money because the smashed fruit cannot be sold.

Make sure that all mandatory information is mentioned, but also think of other useful information such as logos of importers or certificates. Always discuss additional requirements with your buyer.

Inform yourself well about packaging and labelling. Read more about labelling and packaging guidelines for foodstuffs in Access2Markets. If your product is pre-packed for retail, check the additional requirements in Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers. For instructions on handling, packaging and transport, see the Recommended International Code of Practice for Packaging and Transport of Tropical Fresh Fruits and Vegetables.

Use the GS1 Legal Requirements for Labels on Fruit & Vegetables as a guideline on legal requirements for consumer units and trade units in the European Union. This guideline provides a great overview of labelling requirements for different consumer and trade packages.

Contact Open Trade Gate Sweden if you have specific questions about the rules and requirements in Sweden and the European Union.

2. What additional requirements and certificates do buyers ask for?

European buyers often have specific requirements, depending on their sales channels and product segments. Common buyer requirements include GLOBALG.A.P. certification, and compliance with social and environmental standards.

Table 3: Most important certifications requested by fresh fruit and vegetables buyers

Name of certification	Type	Cost for companies	Most used in European end-market (s)	Further Information on getting certification

| GLOBALG.A.P. | Agricultural practices | The total cost for GLOBALG.A.P. includes your own implementation costs (improvements), the GLOBALG.A.P. registration and certificate license fee, and the service fee for the certification body.

The GLOBALG.A.P. fee calculation is based on the standard type and production quantity. A basic GLOBALG.A.P. certification for combinable crops is usually not more than €660. The service fee for the certification bodies varies.

Certificates are issued per product and are valid for one year.

See the GLOBALG.A.P. General Fee Table 2021 | Europe in general, in particular northern Europe and supermarket segments | Follow the 5 Steps to Get Certified

Find an approved consultant or GLOBALG.A.P. Farm Assurer to help you implement Good Agricultural Practices

Find your GLOBALG.A.P. Approved Certification Body (CB) |

| International Featured Standards (IFS) | Food Safety | The cost of certification depends on number of products, number of certification days and company size.

The average price for the 2-day audit for SMEs and 3-5 products is usually in the range of €3,000.
Additional costs include annual re-certification.

The certificate is valid until the end of the second calendar year after the first certification date. Initial certification may include infrastructural investments (separate cost). | Germany, France, also recognised in many other European markets | More information about the process can be found on the IFS Academy portal.

More details about the offer and costs can be found on the list of recognised Certification Bodies.

There are different IFS modules. The modules IFS Food and IFS Global Markets Food are the most important for producers and packers of fresh fruit and vegetables.

The 'roadmap to certification' includes advice on training, implementation, auditing and additional support. You can find consultants and certification bodies in each of the modules.

For training, there is a webshop and there are training providers.

Use the smart phone application IFS Audit Manager to do a self-assessment. |

British Retail Consortium Global Standards (BRCGS)	Food Safety	The fee depends on the company size, number of products and your role in the supply chain. Audit and certification costs depend on the certification body. For a small company with up to 3 products this will typically be around €3,500, excluding expenses on reading material, preparation and accommodation and travelling of the certification body. There is an annual BRCGS service fee of £625 (2021). The frequency of audits depends on the result you achieve. For grade B or higher, you will be audited every 12 months. For grade C, you will be audited every 6 months.	The UK retail market; also very common in mainland Europe	Read the steps how to get a Food Safety Certificate. To find a consultant or certification body, visit the BRCGS website partner sections.
Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit (SMETA)	Social audit focused on working conditions	Certification costs include a membership fee of £100 per production site and audit costs paid to the SMETA approved agency. The costs of the first certification are agreed with the agency and are not fixed but for most SMEs, it is around €1,000.	The UK Germany Most of the European buyers recognise the SMETA audit as a valid assessment	Check SMETA Guidance documents to familiarise yourself with the certification process.

Business Social Compliance Initiative (amfori BSCI)	Social audit focused on working conditions	The certification cost is not fixed, and it is agreed with the audit company. Generally, for SMEs the fee is similar to the SMETA audit costs which are around €1,000	Germany The Netherlands	Check the list of amfori BSCI auditing, training and consultancy companies to request an offer for your company.
Rainforest Alliance	Environmental	There is no fixed fee. Request for the offer must be sent to the authorised certification body. Total cost include administrative costs, audit fees, a premium price paid to farmers, sustainability investment costs and a volume-based royalty.	Large retail chains in northwest Europe	Find the authorised certification body in the Rainforest Alliance directory to ask for the certification cost.
Fairtrade	Sustainability and ethics	Certification costs depend on the number of hired workers, products and processing plants. Fees start at around €2,000. This includes the application fee, the certification fee and the processing fee.	The United Kingdom Germany Benelux	Check Flocert Cost Calculator to make a first assessment of potential certification costs.
Organic	Sustainability, environmental	Average fees are around €1,000 for SMEs and the certificate must be renewed every year. The fee for individual farmers is considerably lower if famers are united in an association and pay a joint fee.	European Union All European countries have their own national organic labels	Contact the EU authorised control bodies in your country to check certification costs.

Source: Autentika Global, modified by ICI Business

Certification as guarantee

As food safety is a top priority in all European food sectors, you can expect most buyers to request extra guarantees from you in the form of certification. All buyers in the supply chain, such as traders, food processors and retailers, require the implementation of a food safety management system based on hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP).

GLOBALG.A.P.

GLOBALG.A.P. (Good Agricultural Practices) is a private, voluntary certification scheme. Buyers of fresh fruit and vegetables in Europe often request this. The certification covers a variety of agricultural practices, ranging from crop management to worker health and environmental concerns. Complying with this certification proves that you have set up and documented a system of good agricultural practices. Buyers can sell GLOBALG.A.P.-certified goods more easily to different European supermarkets. It has become a minimum standard for buyers supplying European supermarkets.

Food safety management systems

Depending on your buyer's clients, you may also be asked to comply with other safety management systems. Buyers in the United Kingdom will likely request BRC Global Standards, but they are in use in several European countries. The British Retail Consortium (BRC) have developed them. BRC standards have specific requirements for hygiene and food safety and are used by food processors and retailers.

The IFS food standard (International Featured Standard) is a food safety management system dedicated to food safety and quality. IFS was developed by the German Retail Federation (HDE) and the French Retail Federation (FDC). It is widely used by food manufacturers and retailers in Europe.

Alternative food safety management certification includes the Safe Quality Food (SQF) programme and FSSC 22000, an industry-developed standard developed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

All the mentioned management systems are recognised by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), which means that major retailers generally accept them. Compliance with certification schemes varies between countries, trade channels and market situations. Buyers can be more lenient during supply shortages, but in general, you can only do business when certifications and standards are in place. Living up to these standards will only become stricter and more widespread in the future.

> **Tips:**
>
> As these are private certifications, taken voluntarily, it is essential that you carefully assess the requirements of each certification and chose the one that is best for the market you are targeting.
>
> Check with your buyer about their preferred food safety management system and certification, which are often market-specific. At the least, become familiar with GLOBALG.A.P., as your EU market entry preparation is certain to include GLOBALG.A.P. certification.
>
> To find consultants to prepare you for IFS certification, you will need to complete a contact form and express your request.
>
> Implement a food safety management system and check the FAO Guidelines for the implementation of HACCP.

Social and environmental compliance

European end consumers are increasingly concerned by social and environmental aspects. Consumers like to know that they are buying goods that have been produced considering social concerns, such as avoiding child labour, worker welfare and fair wages. They are also more environmentally sensitive and want to purchase products that have a lower environmental impact and promote sustainability.

Initiatives based around and attention to corporate social responsibility (CSR) vary across the various parts of Europe. In the eastern part of Europe, fewer buyers require strict social compliance, while there are multinational buyers in Western Europe that have their own compliance programmes. Examples include Unilever's Sustainable Agriculture Code and Tesco's Nurture accreditation. In some cases, increasing attention to social and environmental conditions requires specific actions, such as water management in arid areas and achieving better 'living wages' in poor-supply countries.

As an exporter, you need to implement standards, especially when dealing with buyers that are linked to retail chains. The most common social standards include SMETA. SMETA (Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit) is one of the most-used social audit methodologies in the world. It is designed to help companies assess and improve their supply chains' social and ethical performance. GLOBALG.A.P. has also developed a module that accounts for social concerns. This module is called GRASP (GLOBALG.A.P. Risk Assessment on Social Practice). It focuses on social aspects and is designed to assess and promote good social practices in agricultural production.

Rainforest Alliance certification is also gaining importance in supporting climate-smart agriculture and helping reduce climate change. Fairtrade labels are not on the top of the list of buyers because of their complex requirements and high costs. Fairtrade is most often used for the largest product categories such as bananas. In the near future, you can expect new standards and buyer requirements to be introduced.

Buyer initiatives which affect you as a supplier in terms of social compliance include:

- The IDH Sustainable Trade Initiative, which has a Sustainability Initiative [for] Fruit and Vegetables (SIFAV), a pan-European covenant with over 30 partners, including retailers, brands, traders and civil-society organisations. The 2025 strategy focuses on reducing the environmental footprint across the supply chain, improving working conditions, wages and incomes, and strengthening due diligence reporting and transparency.
- Amfori BSCI (Business Social Compliance Initiative) in northwestern Europe, which includes a Code of Conduct for all its participants, and amfori BEPI for environmental performance;
- Sedex, a non-profit membership organisation to evaluate and manage your performance on labour rights, health and safety, the environment and business ethics;
- The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) in the UK.

Examples of social or sustainable business standards for fresh fruit and vegetables are:

- SMETA (Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit), a social audit;
- GLOBALG.A.P., including add-ons such as GRASP for social compliance and SPRING for sustainable irrigation and groundwater use;
- Rainforest Alliance, a certification that supports climate-smart agriculture and help reduce climate impacts;
- ISO 26000, a standard for social responsibility and ISO 14001 for Environmental management.
- Corporate Carbon Footprint of TÜV Rheinland.

The Green Deal

In the coming years, the European Green Deal will influence how resources are used and greenhouse gas emissions are reduced. The new EU policies on sustainability will prepare Europe in becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

The Farm to Fork Strategy is at the heart of the European Green Deal, aiming to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly. It will ensure sustainable food production and address, for example, packaging and food waste. EU trade agreements with several countries already include rules on trade and sustainable development. For suppliers of fresh fruit and vegetables, it is important to look ahead of the increasing standards and try to be ahead of the developments.

Tips:

Implement at least 1 environmental and 1 social standard. See the Basket of Standards of The Sustainable Trade Initiative for Fruit and Vegetables (SIFAV).

Find out about specific sourcing information of large retail chains. You can usually find these on their corporate websites, for example the approach to sourcing fruit, vegetables and salad crops by Marks & Spencer.

Explore new standards. Consult the ITC Standards Map App for the different labels and to learn about differences between social and environmental standards.

Measure your environmental impact and check your company's current performance, for example, by doing an amfori BEPI self-assessment on the amfori website.

Soft skills and company performance are also important

Complying with the food safety requirements, quality standards and certifications is a precondition to market fresh products in Europe, but it is still not a guarantee for success. Buyers look for trust and reliability and large retailers want to be unburdened. This means that your soft skills and performance are just as important as your product and certifications. Some of the most important things in the fresh trade are a timely delivery, proactive communication and commitment to agreements.

However, good conduct works both ways, so be aware of buyers that have a poor reputation or only show a short-term interest. In this fast-moving and perishable market, sudden decisions are taken, such as 'dumping' your products at very low prices when the quality starts to deteriorate or when the demand slows down. European buyers are not eager to accept their loss and rather settle by claiming a quality issue. It is crucial that you can deal professionally with claims, whether they are justified or not.

Tips:

First of all, make sure that you are well organised as a company. This organisation includes maintaining good logistical planning, documenting your shipments (including proof of quality), responding to your emails within a day and being professional in every aspect of the business.

Do not put your product in consignment with a buyer which you do not know. Consignment is becoming less of a standard practice, and it increases your risks significantly.

Establish and confirm agreements with your buyer on important topics such as delivery and payment terms, product specifications and certifications.

Read the Tips for doing business with European buyers of fresh fruit and vegetables on the CBI's market intelligence platform.

3. What are the requirements for niche markets?

In addition to the official and common requirements, specific requirements apply to niche markets such as organic fruit and vegetables.

Organic, a growing niche market

More and more consumers in Europe prefer organic fruit and vegetables because of their natural and sustainable production methods and their connection to a healthy diet. In countries such as Italy, Ireland, France, Germany and Sweden, organic fruit and vegetables represent around a fifth of the total organic demand.

To market organic products in Europe, you have to use organic production methods according to European legislation. Since January 2022, the new organic regulation (EU) 2018/848 has come into force, laying down the rules on organic production and labelling of organic products. A number of delegated and implementing regulations foresees in the legislation for trade in organic products. Inspection of organic products has become strict to prevent fraud. As a third-country producer, you will have to comply with the same set of rules as those producing in the European Union.

Before certifying your product as organic, you must have used these production methods for at least 2 years throughout a conversion period. Maintaining the required soil fertility and water retention, avoiding cross-contamination, and using organic inputs and reproductive materials can be a challenge for farmers in countries with tropical climates or with limited access to organic reproductive material and inputs.

To get certified as an organic farmer or exporter, you must be registered and certified through a recognised control body or accredited certifier. This control body is responsible for verifying that you comply with the organic rules through an annual inspection and a set of checks. After being audited by an accredited certifier, you can use the EU organic logo on your products, along with the logo of the standard holder.

European countries may prefer a national organic standard, which is in line with the EU certification but often exceeding its requirements. National standards can be an addition when supplying specific markets, for example Naturland in Germany, KRAV in Sweden, BioSuisse in Switzerland.

Figure 7: The official Organic label for organic products in Europe

Source: European Commission

All organic products imported into the EU must have the appropriate electronic certificate of inspection (e-COI). These certificates are managed through the Trade Control and Expert System (TRACES). If you do not have an electronic certificate of inspection, your products will not be released from their port of arrival in the European Union.

Fairtrade and environmental labels

Fairtrade and environmental product labels (visible to consumers) are niche requirements that can distinguish your product from the masses and attract the more conscious consumers. These certification labels are consumer-focused and are the most applicable to products from smallholder farms and main fruit and vegetable categories. Typical fruit varieties that can be found with these labels are bananas, pineapples and coconut, for example. Well-known labels include:

- Fair for Life;
- Fairtrade;
- Rainforest Alliance.

ICI Business carried out this study on behalf of CBI.

Please review our market information disclaimer.