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WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT ORGANIC FOOD AND FARMING?

Some suggested resources:

ATTRA
P.O. Box 3657
Fayetteville, AR 72702
1.800.346.9140
www.attra.ncat.org

**Organic Consumers
Association**
6771 South Silver Hill Drive
Finland, MN 55603
218.226.4164
www.organicconsumers.org

**Organic Farming
Research Foundation**
P.O. Box 440
Santa Cruz, CA 95061
831.426.6606
www.ofrf.org

Organic Trade Association
PO Box 547
Greenfield, MA 01302
413.774.7511
www.ota.com

ORGANIC FOODS: *What Do We Need to Know About Them?*

by George Kuepper
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The growth of demand for organic foods in recent years has been phenomenal. The organic sector has grown about 20% each year for more than a decade. US sales topped \$13.8 billion in 2005 and continued expansion is predicted. It is estimated that three out of every four Americans have at least tried organic products.¹

However, the growth of interest in organics has been accompanied by considerable confusion over terminology, labeling, and the regulations that surround it. This FAQ sheet attempts to shed light on some of these issues.

WHAT DOES ORGANIC MEAN?

“Organic” refers to the way that food and other agricultural products are grown and processed. The USDA’s National Organic Program defines organic food this way:

Organic food is produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations. Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic food is produced without using most conventional pesticides; fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; or ionizing radiation. Before a product can be labeled “organic,” a Government-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to make sure the farmer is following all the rules necessary to meet USDA organic standards. Companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to your local supermarket or restaurant must be certified, too.²

ARE THERE BENEFITS TO BUYING AND EATING ORGANIC FOOD?

While many claims are made in the marketplace, the USDA does not state that organically produced foods are safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced foods. However, research in recent years has shown higher levels of vitamin C in organic oranges, and of antioxidants in organic tomatoes.³ Research has also shown that organic food has two-thirds less pesticide residue than conventional food.⁴ A related study found that when children switched to organic food for most of their diets, the presence of certain pesticide residues in their bodies fell to non-detectable levels.

Organic farming also has a positive environmental record. Studies beginning as early as the 1970s in both the United States and Europe have shown that organic farms and methods commonly use less fossil fuel, lose less soil to erosion, improve biodiversity, sequester more carbon in the soil, and leach fewer nutrients into surface and ground waters.^{5,6,7}

CAN'T ORGANIC ALSO BE CALLED GMO- AND/OR PESTICIDE RESIDUE-FREE?

It is true that organic foods are produced without the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and most synthetic pesticides.

Unfortunately, pollen from genetically engineered crops like corn and canola is so prevalent in the environment that small levels of contamination are almost impossible to avoid. The same can be said for synthetic pesticides, residues of which can be found in ground water,

rainfall, and soil. Therefore, claims that organic products are completely GMO- or pesticide residue-free are not made. However, as stated previously, studies indicate that pesticide residues are much lower in organic products. Also, GMO contamination of organic crops appears to be slight in those instances where it has been measured.

WHY IS IT CALLED ORGANIC?

Several farm and garden writers began using the word “organic” in the 1940s to describe a natural system of agriculture then commonly called “humus farming.” It was intended to capture the essence of these farms as biologically complete, balanced, and self-contained units, and “organic” quickly became the more popular term.⁸ This is contrary to the prevailing assumption that the name is associated with organic chemistry or the kind of fertilizer organic farmers use.

WHO REGULATES ORGANIC PRODUCTION, MARKETING, AND LABELING?

The federal government set parameters for the production, processing and certification of organic food in the Organic Food Production Act of 1990 and mandated the creation of the National Organic Program (NOP). The NOP is responsible for implementing and enforcing the National Organic Standard, which went into full effect October 2002. (The National Standard may be downloaded in its entirety from the NOP web site at www.ams.usda.gov/NOP/.)

The key to implementation of the National Organic Standard is the certification of farms and processing or handling operations.

Certification—the license to sell or represent a product as organic—can only be granted by certifying agents that have been fully accredited by the NOP. Farms or processors that sell less than \$5,000 of organic products each year are exempt

from becoming certified.

HOW DO I RECOGNIZE ORGANIC FOOD PRODUCTS?

Single ingredient products, such as fresh fruit or vegetables, may carry a simple sticker saying “organic.” “Organic” might also be displayed on a sign above the produce display. The USDA’s organic seal may also be displayed.

There are three categories of labeling for multi-ingredient organic products:

- 100% Organic: Made with 100% organic ingredients
- Organic: Made with at least 95% organic ingredients
- Made With Organic Ingredients: Made with a minimum of 70% organic ingredients, with strict restrictions—including no bio-engineered organisms – on the remaining 30%.

Products with less than 70% organic ingredients may list organically produced ingredients on the side panel of the package, but may not make any organic claims on the front of the package.

The USDA’s organic seal (seen at right) may only be displayed on products that contain a minimum of 95% organic ingredients.

WHERE CAN I FIND ORGANIC FOODS?

Just about anywhere these days. Recent surveys have shown that as much as 45% of organic foods are now being sold in mass market stores such as Wal-Mart, Hy-Vee, and IGA.⁹ Also, continue to look for organic food at traditional local venues like farmers’ markets, roadside stands, and through community supported agriculture farms (CSAs).



ENDNOTES

1. Nutrition Business Journal Staff. 2006. U.S. Organic Food Industry VI. Nutrition Business Journal 11(3) (March): 1-9.
2. Organic Food Standards and Labels: The Facts. 2007. National Organic Program. www.ams.usda.gov/NOP/Consumers/brochure.html
3. The Organic Center. 2007. State of Science: Nutritional Quality. <http://www.organiccenter.org/science.nutri.php>
4. The Organic Center. 2006. Minimizing Pesticides in Your Diet. www.organiccenter.org/report-files/2495_Pesticides_from_Selkirk_Press_final.pdf
5. Lockeretz, W., et al. 1981. Organic farming in the Corn Belt. *Science* 211:540-547.
6. Drinkwater, L.E., et al. 1998. Legume-based cropping systems have reduced carbon and nitrogen losses. *Nature* 396:262-265.
7. Mader, P., et al. 2002. Soil fertility and biodiversity in organic farming. *Science* 296:1694-1697.
8. Scofield, A.M. 1986. Organic farming—the origin of the name. *Biological Agriculture and Horticulture*. Vol. 4. p. 1-5.
9. Nutrition Business Journal Staff. 2006. U.S. Organic Food Industry VI. Nutrition Business Journal 11(3) (March): 1-9.



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