

ORGANIC FARMING

The fundamentals of organic farming – the ideals of land stewardship in order to keep the land productive for future generations – are not new. However, organic farming as we know it today came about as a reaction to the wide adoption of input-intensive farming around the time of World War II, as a result of technological advances made earlier in the century and food shortages experienced during the war. Farmers around the world saw the potential dangers of industrialized farming and rejected the idea that this was advancement in agriculture. They began to study and develop methods that increased the long term productivity of their farm system and practice farming as stewards of the land. This type of farming came to be known as “organic.”

PRINCIPLES OF ORGANIC

The philosophy of organic food production maintains certain principles: biodiversity, ecological balance, sustainability, natural plant fertilization, natural pest management, and soil integrity. Since farms vary in product and practice, there is also a wide variety in how these principles are applied. However, generally, organic food products:

- Are grown or raised by a producer who uses practices in balance with the natural environment;
- Are produced on land that is free of known and perceived toxic and persistent chemical pesticides and fertilizers;
- Are planted on a rotating basis from field to field, rather than growing the same crop in the same place year after year; and
- In the case of animals, are not given hormones or antibiotics, are fed organic feed, and allowed the space and freedom to behave naturally.

REGULATION

In October 2002, the production and marketing of organic food came under regulation by the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Organic Program. The National Organic Standards Board, a federal advisory panel to the USDA for developing legislation, defines organic agriculture as “an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony.”

Specifically, the regulations:

- Prohibit most synthetic (and petroleum-derived) pesticides and fertilizers (for a list see www.ams.usda.gov);
- Prohibit all antibiotics, genetic engineering, irradiation and sewage sludge;
- Require that all organically produced animal products come from animals fed 100% organic feed (which does not contain any animal byproducts or growth hormones);
- Require all organically produced animal products come from animals raised with access to the outdoors;
- Require that processed products labeled “organic” contain at least 95% organic ingredients.
- After the USDA standards were implemented, all farmers describing their product as organic had to go through a national certification process involving a substantial fee and extensive record keeping.

CORPORATE TAKEOVER

Due to tremendous consumer demand, large corporations have acquired or developed many popular organic food brands. For example, Silk Soymilk and Horizon dairy products are produced by Dean Foods, the nation's largest milk

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ORGANIC FARMING (cont'd)

producer. Since 1997, Heinz has acquired many smaller organic/sustainable labels, such as Celestial Seasonings, Rice/SoyDream and WestBrae. Since 2003, major chains such as Safeway and Krogers have added organic lines. The corporate takeover of organic food is further encouraged by Wal-Mart (the number one food retailer in the country), as it expanded their organic food sales in 2006. Corporate-owned organic brands can push down the prices of organic products because they're willing to cut corners in the production process and pay farmers less. Some cut costs by confining dairy cows most of the year and otherwise sacrificing animal welfare, which allows them to sell their "organic" milk at prices that small organic farms with higher standards can't match.

However, the fact that large corporations have involved themselves in organic food production is not all bad. As they sell more organic food, more acres of land are protected from chemical pesticides and fertilizers, thus helping the environment and the soil in which our food is grown. Additionally, mass produced organic products have significantly raised

awareness of organics among consumers. Buying organic products is an important step in the learning processes necessary to create a more sustainable food system.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Ⓞ According to the Organic Trade Association, consumer demand for organic agricultural products has increased steadily in the U.S., rising 20 percent or more annually through 2006.
- Ⓞ A 22-year study conducted by the Rodale Institute determined that organic farming operations (in corn and soybeans) use 30% less energy than conventional farms and conserve more water in the soil, induce less erosion, maintain soil quality and conserve more natural resources than conventional farming does.
- Ⓞ In 2005, over 4 million acres of farmland – 1.7 million acres of cropland and 2.3 million acres of rangeland and pasture – were dedicated to organic food production.

What You Can Do...

The organic label is a useful tool when you're shopping because it helps you find food free of pesticides, antibiotics and artificial hormones. When possible, buy whole fruits, grains, vegetables, and meat and dairy products directly from an organic farmer. If you want to buy processed goods, try to get these from independent, local

sources, such as food co-ops, buying clubs, or small businesses where the products are made on site, as these are less likely to include preservatives and additives. If you have a question about their practices or ingredients, you can ask the person that produces your food – or better, visit the farm or look in the kitchen.



To find sustainably raised food near you
visit www.eatwellguide.org.

Find more detailed information about organic farming on our website
at www.sustainabletable.org/issues/organicfarming.

