

# What Does Organic Really Mean?



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We can walk down supermarket aisles today and see produce labeled “organic” or even milk or spaghetti. Many of us buy our food from Farmers Markets or directly from the farm because we know it is fresher and in some cases it is organic. What does organic really mean and is it healthier for us and our families?

The commonly understood definition of organic is a food product grown or raised without synthetic pesticides and conventional fertilizers. However, according to the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), an advisory panel to the US Department of Agriculture, organic agriculture is: “an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based upon minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony.”

Organic farming had its origins in the 1940’s with J.I. Rodale’s launch of Organic Farming and Gardening magazine

advocating “non-chemical” farming and gardening. This soon became known as the primary source of information on this approach to food production. Rodale had been influenced by the earlier writings of Sir Howard on the subject. In 1962, Rachel Carson’s publication of *Silent Spring* brought a heightened concern of the impact of pesticides on the environment. This created an identity for “organics” as an alternative to pesticide issues.

A decade later, organic farming and marketing began to develop as an industry and the complex issue of defining “organic” was undertaken. Early concepts of organic were that one could produce crops by doing nearly nothing. This practice of “farming or gardening by neglect” depleted soil nutrients and resulted in poor yields and dismal quality.

As a result of some of the set backs organic agriculture experienced during this era, current standards for certified organic production require producers to have an “organic plan” that outlines the use of soil building activities and natural pest management.

In 2002, the US Department of Agriculture adopted the National



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Organic Standard that spells out what farmers and food processors must (and must not) do to be certified "organic." The certifications are made by third-party certifiers that inspect both the property and practices of the producer and "certify" that they conform to the standards of the National Organic Program (NOP). Certified organic production means production by approved methods with precautions taken to eliminate contamination with prohibited materials and mixing with "non-organic" products. This requires that producers work closely with their certifying agent and understand the standards well. Those that meet those standards are allowed to market their products as "USDA Certified Organic" and display the official USDA seal on their packaging.

Although organic farming is possible on a large scale, traditionally, the average size of organic farms is smaller, largely due to labor requirements. Organic farms tend to be more labor intensive. It involves the inclusion of the following principles in the operation: biodiversity, integration, sustainability, natural plant nutrition, natural pest management and integrity on the part of the producer. Most organic operations will reflect all of these to some degree. Each farm is a distinct entity so there is a large degree of variation among them.

Organic production is a viable system of agriculture based upon sound farming practices that does not include conventional chemicals. Organic production focuses on renewable resources, soil and water conservation, and management practices that restore, maintain and enhance biological function. Practices include the use of cover crops, green manures and crop rotations to maintain soil fertility, biological activity and long term soil

health. Pests in the form of weeds, insects and diseases are controlled through biological controls such as crop rotations and natural predators. Biodiversity is the mimicking of nature by planting of a variety of crops rather than a single one. This reduces insect and disease problems, and increases nutrient cycling. Rotational grazing and mixed forage pastures are used for livestock operations to maintain the health of the forages and meet the nutritional requirements of the animals. Careful attention is given to avoiding overcrowding and monitoring animals to maintain healthy herds. Only alternative health care is used for livestock marketed as "organic".

Organic producers reduce the external and off-farm inputs and eliminate synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and other materials such as hormones and antibiotics.

Organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones and fed organically grown feeds. Organic food is produced without using most conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge, bioengineering, or ionizing radiation. Companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to the supermarket must be certified organic too. The complete rule along with detailed fact sheets is available on the National Organic Program's website <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Consumers/brochure.html>

Source: Kuepper and Gegner, NCAT Agricultural Specialists, *Fundamentals of Sustainable Agriculture*, ATTRA, August 2004

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