

GREEN LIVING

By Cile Downs

Why “Organic”?

It was around the turn of the century, I forget exactly what year. I was looking for the latest word on refrigerators and went to the Amagansett library to consult *Consumer Reports*. Suddenly, my attention was seized by an article on organic produce. Oho! said I, this is more interesting even than my new refrigerator. Actually, I was an old reader of Rodale’s publications, especially *Organic Gardening and Farming*. What did *Consumer Reports* say? For comparison, produce was gathered from many sources, “organic” and otherwise. They were looked at, sampled and chemically analyzed. The results: in appearance and flavor, a lot of overlap, with no clear advantage to either. In nutritional value, same story. In pesticide residue, a big difference. A full 75% of conventionally grown produce contained at least one pesticide residue, while only 23% of organic produce did.



Before “organic” became the fad it is today, displays of organic vegetables often languished too long on the shelf, or there was no supply close to home. No wonder the appearance and flavor weren’t always superior, not to speak of loss of perishable vitamins. But why were there any chemical residues in organic food? There are several possible answers. Before the establishment of U.S. Department of Agriculture standards for the label, probably some things called “organic” weren’t. Then, pesticides can drift from wherever they are being applied. Fields, now organic, but formerly used for ordinary agriculture, would naturally remain contaminated for a while. We now know that organic produce sharing a display case with the poisoned sort can pick up contamination. Even rain and groundwater today may contain toxic traces. Yet, despite all these things, organic methods, over-all, conferred a measurable advantage for health and, since then, standards have become stiffer. At the time, this struck me as entrancing news. And, I thought, it’s not just the health of consumers; the farmer’s neighbors and the workers in the fields are safer too.

“Organic” has been defined for over 50 years as growing things (generally foods) without chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides or fungicides. Nowadays, most of us would add genetic modification and irradiation to the forbidden factors and, if you are dealing with meat, hormones and antibiotics. Animals, especially dairy herds, are supposed to get out into a field at least part of the time.

In recent history, public knowledge about the frightening array of pesticides that have lodged themselves in all our bodies has vastly increased. At the same time, there is that distressing trend in our information about what amounts of these are required to inflict damage. We hear that smaller and smaller, in fact, incredibly tiny, amounts of some pesticides can do immense harm. Also, we are more and more aware of the unique vulnerability of children, whose rapidly growing bodies are much more sensitive to these chemicals than those of adults. Scariest of all, we learn about certain stages in the development of the fetus, when damage can be permanent if the mother is exposed, the worst of that damage being to the nervous system and brain..

It is undoubtedly the health concerns that have brought about the revolution represented by, for instance, the Whole Foods phenomenon. Admittedly, a vague idea that “organic” means “healthy” may motivate some consumers who have only the foggiest idea of the above facts. For that hint of insurance against a health threat, many people are willing to pay more, and who can blame them? Although, in fact, organic food is not always more expensive, indeed some is not even labeled as such. Pesticides, after all, cost money, so why use them when you don’t have to?

However, at the moment there is a huge financial allure in this rapidly increasing market that has brought in large growers with the various bottom-line-oriented shenanigans that a recent New Yorker article found so deplorable: corner-cutting, corporate pressure on the agencies supposed to be watchdogs, the standards for the label “organic” threatened. Compare this to the relaxed FDA approval process that lets drugs be marketed that - oops! - turn out to kill people from time to time. This standard-lowering trend must be opposed. I hate to see a good word like “organic” having its meaning stolen from it. But what can we all do right now?



1. Grow your own kitchen garden. Think of peas or lettuce five minutes from your table, picked at their peak, guaranteed organic because you did it yourself.
2. If you haven’t the space or the time, get your produce at a local community farm. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), where you buy a membership and receive a weekly allotment, is beautifully represented by:
 - a. Green Thumb, Watermill. Also has a glorified farmstand with both organic and conventional produce
 - b. Quail Hill/Peconic Land Trust, Amagansett. All organic, also has a winter membership.
 - c. EECO Farm, East Hampton. You can engage a plot and grow your own or patronize their stand.
3. Seek out organic produce and meats, now far more readily available at local grocery stores as well as health food stores. And learn about the most seriously pesticide-infested foods, annually listed as that year’s “Dirty Dozen,” online at organic.org.
4. Never buy out of season, from out of town. If your wintertime strawberries and melons from Mexico or salad Greens from California taste like cardboard or paper towels, let that be a lesson! Pricey, too. Remember that all the things that stored well in grandma’s root cellar, like cabbage, carrots, potatoes, etc. will store well in your refrigerator or unheated pantry or can be shipped without too much damage. Sprouts can be grown anywhere, including close by, and they travel alive. Organic veggies from local sources are more delicious, fresher and minimize fossil fuel use for transport.

There is more to be said about the question of organic agriculture than just the personal health aspect of food. See the article, “Beyond Organic”.