

All About Organic

Grocery shopping these days has many of us feeling overwhelmed. With so many different choices it is hard to know what is best. Do we go with the cheaper option or do we splurge on the organic?



What exactly is organic food anyways?

The term “organic” refers to the way agricultural products are grown and processed. Organic grains, vegetables and fruit must be grown in safe soil, have no modifications and must remain separate from non-organic crops. This means these products must remain free of synthetically-produced (meaning non-natural) chemicals, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, or growth hormones. Organic livestock, such as cows, sheep or chickens, must have access to the outdoors and be given organic feed. They are not allowed to be given antibiotics, growth hormones or animal by-products (the parts of the animal not intended for human consumption).

Organic farmers choose a number of strategies for keeping their soil safe and their food healthy. Some of these strategies include:

- *Crop rotation* - this refers to the practice of growing a number of different plants in the same area. This is an easy way to prevent the spread of pests and increase soil fertility.
- *Using green manures* – green manures are a breakdown of plant material that provides nitrogen and organic material to the soil, keeping weeds away and preventing drought and soil erosion.
- *Using beneficial insects* – these types of insects are natural enemies of garden pests. They provide an effective, non-toxic approach for controlling pests and weeds.

Understanding organic labels

Organic certification is a rigorous process. It requires producers to go above and beyond the typical food safety laws and adhere to a strict set of standards. These include:

- Use of land that has been chemical free for at least 3 years
- Detailed record keeping and regular audits
- Routine on-site inspection

In Canada

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Look for the “Canada Organic” label. It is your assurance that a product has met the government’s regulatory requirements.

In the U.S.A.

Look for the “USDA Organic” seal. Only foods that are 95-100% organic can use this label.

Benefits of organic food

There are a number of reasons to go organic. Some of these include:

- Organic food contains no carcinogenic pesticides – pesticides build up in our bodies over years of exposure and could lead to health issues such as headaches, birth defects, and added strain on weakened immune systems
- Organic food is often fresher – this is because it doesn’t contain any preservatives that make it last longer
- Organic farming is better for the environment – it reduces pollution, conserves water, reduces soil erosion, increases soil fertility and uses less energy than traditional farming.

When organic labels matters most

According to the Environmental Working Group, the following 12 fruits and vegetables have the highest pesticide levels on average:

- Apples
- Strawberries
- Grapes
- Celery
- Peaches
- Spinach
- Sweet Bell Peppers

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- Nectarines (Imported)
- Cucumbers
- Cherry Tomatoes
- Potatoes
- Snap Peas (Imported)

Why is organic food more expensive?

Organic farming is much more labor-intensive since the farmers do not use pesticides, chemical fertilizers, or drugs. Obtaining organic certification and maintaining this status is expensive. Organic feed for animals costs twice as much as regular feed. Finally, organic farms are typically too small to receive government subsidies.

Tips for affording organic food

- Shop at farmer's markets
- Buy in season
- Prioritize your purchases – packaged and canned organic items, such as soups, cookies, and pancake mix, may not be worth the extra cost
- Join a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program – this typically consists of paying a fee to the farmer at the start of the growing season and receiving a weekly box of produce

Sources: www.inspection.gc.ca

www.helpguide.org/life/organic_foods_pesticides.gmo.html