

The Green Notebook:

Organics Explained: Part I

By Tuesday Trippier

Organic food is popping up everywhere. Two or three years ago, you couldn't have found an organic apple in town unless you were at the Farmer's Market on a Saturday morning or at Stratford Ecological Center picking your own veggies. Now Kroger's and Buehler's both carry a decent selection of organic produce and other organic food items. Heck, I can even buy an organic version of my favorite Frosted Mini Wheats now—seems everyone is jumping on board.

Organic use is certainly gaining in popularity. A study by the Hartman Group (Organic Food and Beverage Trends: 2004) reports that 66 percent of U.S. consumers use organic products at least occasionally. That number was up 55 percent from 2000.

So, what does it all mean? Let's start with some definitions: A food can be labeled organic (and bear the USDA organic seal) if it contains 95-100 percent certified organic ingredients. The USDA calls organic "food that was produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations." Simply put, that is food grown without the use of certain conventional pesticides and fertilizers made with synthetic (man-made) ingredients or sewage sludge (nice). It also means animals are raised without antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic food cannot be called such if its bioengineered or exposed to ionizing radiation in its processing.

It's not easy for a food to become "organic"—it can take a farm years to be certified organic because the soil needs to be free of prohibited substances for at least three years. Plus, a government-certifier has to inspect the farm to make sure all the rules are being followed and that the food isn't being poorly processed after it leaves the farm. I suppose it wouldn't make sense to have organic apples transported in a truck that was cleaned with toxic chemicals...rather defeats the purpose.

So is organic food healthier? That debate goes on...the USDA clearly states that it makes no claim that organically grown food is safer or more nutritious than its conventional counterparts. Don't they have to say that? Organic proponents and some health officials say that organic food tastes better and has a superior nutritional value (packs more nutrient punch).

Why do organics cost more? Organic food has a heftier price tag for a number of reasons, but mainly because it costs more to produce (more is done by hand than by mass farming techniques). Is it worth it? That, I guess, depends on how you look at it. People buy organic for lots of reasons including health (keeps the chemicals off your plate), the environment (protects our soil, water and saves energy) and the community (supports local economy and the local farmer). Weigh all those out and you decide.

April is a good time to try organics. All month long, the Go Organic! for Earth Day campaign is handing out coupons to retailers along with promotional and educational info. Log onto organicearthday.org (or call 866-446-6742) to find participating stores, shopping tips, facts, recipes and coupons.

To find out more about organic food, check out www.organicconsumers.org or www.coopamerica.org or hit the library. Next week's column will feature where you can purchase organics locally and provide a list of other resources, so stay tuned! *Tuesday Trippier lives in Delaware, is a writer and mother of three, with a special interest in green living. She earned her journalism degree from Otterbein College in Westerville and has written for various publications.*

