Why Buy Organic?

By Jody Norman

Here's all you need to know before adding organic foods to your next shopping list.

Once upon a time, we only had to wash a little dirt off our produce in order to feel certain we were eating clean food. Now, however, we worry about hormones, pesticides, chemical fertilizers, genetic modification and more. Luckily, today's conscious buyer can take comfort in one single word: organic.

What Is Organic?

Organic food consists of crops grown without genetic modification and without the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or waste materials such as sewage sludge. Organic also means meat, poultry, eggs and dairy from animals that are raised without hormones or antibiotics, and fed on "natural" pasture rather than on feed enhanced by slaughterhouse waste.

"I think buying organic is a vote for a different method of production," said Carl Winter, a food toxicologist at the University of California Davis and a food science communicator for the Institute of Food Technologists in Chicago.

One of the major differences in this new method of production, he said, is its regional quality. Organic food often is grown locally, encouraging the money that consumers spend on produce to stay within the community. The local flavor of organic produce also tends to lower the distribution costs associated with transporting food from farm to store and results in lower gas consumption and less air pollution because the journey is so much shorter.

Buying organic food supports environmental protection in other ways as well. Consumers who buy organic invest in cleaner water and air through their support of a farming system that relies on natural methods of pest control. As such, pesticides do not seep into groundwater or spread into local rivers and lakes. "Pesticide residues are commonly found on crops, so for the consumer interested in reducing their pesticide load, organic is it," said Nell Newman, co-founder and president of Newman's Own® Organics.

Of course, organic foods are good for consumers, too. An apple grown and harvested conventionally can have as many as 36 different pesticides sprayed on it, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Environmental Working Group (EWG), which cites government research. "If people knew how their food was grown, they'd be willing to pay the extra money for organic," Newman said.

What to Buy

The key to identifying organic food while grocery shopping is the USDA organic seal, which certifies that the food items which bear it are organic. The seal, however, is voluntary, so knowing common organic brands helps. Popular brands include Silk®, Apple & Eve®, Nature's Path®, Horizon Organic®, Newman's Own®, Heartland® and Earthbound Farm®.

Consumers who want to buy organic can identify many organic foods by studying their labels. Organic produce, for instance, has a five-digit number on it that begins with the number nine, while conventional produce has a four-digit number. Consumers must also be aware of verbiage on signs, and should remember that "natural" and "organic" are not interchangeable.

So, the next time you're at SAM'S CLUB®, remember that organic purchases support healthy environments, healthy families and healthy communities—all by choosing the right bag of mini-carrots.

Jody Norman is a freelance writer interested in environmental issues, particularly those with an organic focus.

Organic items are available in select Clubs.