

NORTHWEST EARTH INSTITUTE ECO-TIPS

BUYING ORGANIC

The trend in buying organic is one of the success stories of the sustainability movement. The market for organic food has been growing by 15-20 percent every year.

However, organic farms still provide only a fraction of the nation's food supply (less than two percent in 2002). Marketing and distribution infrastructure is too small to benefit from economies of scale, and organic farms do not receive the same subsidies as large conventional farms. Production costs and risks can also be higher: for example when soil is being replenished by a cover crop, it's not producing food. These factors combine to make organic food more expensive than conventional food. Why are consumers so willing to pay more?

HEALTH CONCERNS

In a survey of those who purchase organic food, 66 percent reported that health was the primary motivator.

According to EPA about two-thirds of herbicides and fungicides used by American farmers are probably or possibly carcinogens, and studies show that residues of these chemicals remain on a portion of fruits and vegetables in the grocery store. Children are particularly at risk because their neurological systems are still forming and their immune systems are less able to rid their bodies of contaminants. Also, they consume more calories per pound of body weight and eat fewer types of food than adults. A study from the University of Washington showed that preschoolers fed conventional diets had six times the level of certain pesticides in their urine as those who ate organic food.

Farmers' sprays are also killing wildlife, endangering farm workers, and degrading soil and water. Pesticides have been detected in well water in almost every state.

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE GROWING PRACTICES

But beyond health there's another important reason to buy organic—to bring about a shift from an unsustainable agricultural system to a sustainable one. The current system has been incredibly productive, but it's based on using up two irreplaceable assets: top soil and petroleum. US Soil and Conservation Service estimates that more than three billion tons of topsoil are eroded from US croplands each year. Modern farming uses more petroleum than any other single industry, about 12 percent of total energy supply. More energy is now used to produce synthetic fertilizers than to till, cultivate, and harvest all the crops in the US.



Pesticides, also made from petroleum, are being used in increasing quantities. Growing single crops on huge tracks of land year after year invites pest problems. The chemicals kill the pests' natural enemies, and the pests develop resistance to the chemicals designed to kill them. Therefore, farmers have to apply more chemicals. They are applying three times as much chemicals as 40 years ago to kill the same pests.

Organic farmers, on the other hand, develop food-growing practices that don't use up nature's resources. They raise a wide variety of plants and animals on smaller plots of land, understanding that diverse systems are more resilient. They rotate crops and grow cover crops to minimize pests, avoid erosion, and return nutrients to the soil. Complex living soils are replenished with composted plant material and manure. Healthier soil results in fruits and vegetables with a higher concentration of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants that promote health.

ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

Certified organic food must now meet standards established by the USDA. Not only is it grown and processed without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, but also without antibiotics, genetic engineering, irradiation, or sewage sludge.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Grow your own. With just a little space, you can plant a raised bed of vegetables to meet your household needs. Some homeowners are making their landscape plantings edible as well.
- Buy directly from local farmers when possible, either at farmers' markets, through community supported agriculture, or at roadside stands.
- Frequent organic food stores or the organic section of your supermarket.
- Select local produce in season. Buying organic may not be the best choice if the item must be shipped a long distance and harvested before it is ripe.