Organic Farming: What Does It Mean?

Organic farming has gained a lot of focus as environmental concerns grow. More and more people are buying organic products for a variety of reasons, even during increasing food prices. However, there is still confusion as to what organic farming is and what the benefits are. The following article will discuss the definition of organic farming, how it is regulated, what environmental benefits there are and if there are any added nutritional benefits over conventional farming products.

Definition

The definition of organic farming is a system where no synthetic materials are used in the farming or processing method. Pesticide and fertilizer use is heavily regulated and natural means are instead used to produce a healthy yield. There is also organic livestock farming where the livestock is given organic feed and the use of antibiotics and growth hormones are prohibited. Genetically modified organisms and irradiation of food is also strictly prohibited.

Regulation

In the United States organic farming is regulated by the USDA's National Organic Program (NOP) that began after the passing of the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. This act enforces strict guidelines to growers as well as the processors of organic products with sales > $5,000 per year in an effort to standardize organic farming.

Labeling

The labeling of organic products is also regulated by the USDA and has strict definitions based on the amount of organic content contained within.

- Only products containing 95% or more organic content can bear the USDA certification.
- Labels stating ‘made with organic products’ have to be at least 70% organic
- If there is less than 70% organic content there is no labeling on the front panel, but listed in the ingredients what is organic and what is not.
Environmental Impact

There are many reasons to buy organic products but concerns about the environment and interest in sustainable farming are the strongest.

There are many studies that have been done on how organic farming reduces the energy input needed to farm, up to 30% less than conventional. There is also less nitrogen from fertilizers going into waterways which reduces the impact on the Gulf of Mexico’s “dead zones”.

Topsoil, known to erode with conventional farming, is increased by the farming techniques used. This organic matter also contributes to biodiversity in soil that leads to healthy plants able to resist disease and drought. Finally, one of the biggest impacts that organic farms have is that it takes out 7,000 lbs of carbon dioxide per acre, per year.

Nutrition

At this point in time there are not enough studies done on the nutritional content of organic vs. conventional products to say that one is more nutritious than the other. The main benefits of organic over conventional in terms of health is the absence of chemical residues from pesticides and fertilizers.

Conclusion

While the environmental impacts seem to favor using only organic farming techniques, it is a labor intensive and timely way to produce goods. This is reflected in the price for organic making it higher than conventionally produced products. Higher prices are a barrier for a lot of people to buy organically grown products, even if they would like to do so.

For that reason, buying organic products remains to be a personal choice made for whatever reason matters most to the individual. There is a lot of information out there, some misleading, but hopefully this article has cleared up some of the confusion and given you the tools necessary to help you make a more informed choice.

For more information:

USDA - National Organic Program page

Organic Trade Association- More information on organic farming

Wheatsfield Coop – local coop featuring organic products

HyVee – sells organic products in stores