

The Oregonian

Sizing up the home-grown advantage

Organic has become big business, so more shoppers wonder whether to just buy local

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Leslie Carlson has three kids, a career and a shopping problem: She knows too much. And the simple act of buying strawberries in a supermarket backs her into a corner.

The organic berries from California, grown without synthetic chemicals, are the best choice for first-grader Elliott's lunchbox, she thinks. But they traveled hundreds of miles on a truck to get to Portland, burning fossil fuels along the way.

The Oregon berries, grown with conventional pesticides and fertilizers, aren't organic, and the chemicals, she thinks, are hard on the environment and bad for her kids. But buying those local berries would put dollars into the pocket of an Oregon farmer, and trim fuel use and carbon emissions.

"I find myself going to the grocery store and asking myself really unanswerable questions," says the Southeast Portland public relations professional. "Such as, which is worse? Pesticides or climate change?"

Food shopping, she says, is not so fun anymore. Now it's a task she calls "the grocery gantlet."

Organic used to be the one-size-fits-all solution for shoppers who wanted to eat green and clean and could afford it. Now, for growing numbers of Portlanders, the choices are less clear.

With the face of organic changing from a slightly hippie aesthetic to corporate agribusiness, some say buying local is the answer.

"Even two, three years ago, consumers weren't talking about local in the same breath as they were organic," says Deborah Kane, vice president of food and farms at the nonprofit group Ecotrust, proponents of local eating and a regional food system. "Now people are playing with whether local trumps organic, or vice versa."

In terms of pesticide residues in your food, buying supermarket organic carrots, grown on a mega-farm a few states away, might be equal to picking up a bunch from the grizzled guy who sells organic carrots at your local farmers market.

But local speaks to other issues . . . not just how food was grown, but where? How much fuel was spent, and exhaust produced, to get it here? Whose pocket is my dollar dropping into?

Saving energy,

saving communities Energy use and global warming top the list of concerns for many self-described "locavores." The choice between big organic and little local is not a tossup, some Oregon farmers say.

"It does matter," says Chris Roehm of Square Peg Farm in Forest Grove. "Local food, grown 30 miles from your house, has a much smaller impact on the Earth than organic food grown on another continent."

Along with extra petroleum used to transport food from other states or hemispheres, food shipped long distances -- whether it's organic or not -- puts more carbon emissions in the air.

"Right now we're flying organic food all over the world, we're growing it wherever we can grow it most cheaply and moving it wherever we can sell it most dearly," says Michael Pollan, author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma." "If energy is your issue, if you care about global warming, you should buy local."

If you want a wide variety of pesticide-free food on your table year-round, at a bargain price, maybe you shouldn't, at least not always. Eating local in the Pacific Northwest is great if you're content to eat cabbage and root vegetables all winter. But Americans wedded to convenience and low prices, and now to top-quality organic fruits and vegetables year-round, are driving the global food system.

"Consumers want fresh apples in March," says John Foster, interim director of Oregon Tilth, a certification agency for organic farms and food processors worldwide. "As long as they demand that, the fresh stuff has got to come from another hemisphere. If you want tomatoes in January, they're either coming from a greenhouse that's industrial in nature, or they're coming from out of the country."

And many longtime organic backers agree that more acres farmed without pesticides and synthetic fertilizers is a victory.

Nor are big organic labels created equal. Organic Valley milk is sold in supermarkets across the nation, but the cooperative relies on a network of local producers and processors. If you're buying their milk in Portland, it came from a dairy in Oregon or Washington farms and was processed in Portland.

But local purchasing, organic or not, keeps the local economy humming, says Roehm, who left a job as a manager for a multinational food company for rural farm life.

"The farmer that sells me that produce (from the Big Box store) isn't going to pay for Forest Grove schools," Roehm says. "The profits don't get invested in a business that might employ my neighbor."

Eating local today,

security tomorrow Even more important, say locavores, is keeping rural land as farms and open spaces instead of plowing it under for housing or another use. It makes for a more picturesque drive in the country, but the real issue, say the movement's most passionate voices, is food security for the region.

"I'm not one of these people that's screaming bloody murder about industrial organic at all," says Brian Rohter, CEO of New Seasons Markets, where local is the mantra. But the conversation needs to turn, he says, to how to make it sustainable and protect small growers, so we don't become solely dependent on inexpensive organic food grown far from home.

Fostering a regional network of farmers, ranchers and fishermen will protect us decades down the road, when soaring oil prices make foreign food too expensive, or diplomatic ties break down with a nation that feeds us. Then, Rohter says, "if part of the system fails, the whole system won't fail."

With New Seasons' seven Portland-area stores championing homegrown products and a wide web of farmers markets crawling with customers, some farmers are opting out of organic certification entirely.

"We're small and community-oriented. Organic doesn't speak so much to that anymore," says Aaron Bolster of Deep Roots Farm, who still follows organic growing practices but isn't certified by a third party. "Now, especially since the USDA has taken over the word 'organic,' it's a good way to differentiate ourselves from a market that's gotten increasingly consolidated and homogenized."

Roehm and Amy Benson, his wife and farming partner, skipped signing up for organic certification this year as well. Instead, they used the estimated \$800 they saved (a percentage of gross sales, payable to the agency that certifies the organic farm) to buy two Berkshire sows, adding pork to the fruit, vegetables and eggs they produce for farmers market customers and the 40 members of their community-supported agriculture program.

In addition to paying annual certification fees that cover inspection costs, certified organic farms must document farm practices in detail and go through rigorous annual inspections, taking owners away from farm tasks. Organic methods also are much more labor intensive -- weeding and picking by hand, for instance -- so labor costs are higher.

Benson and Roehm still follow the rules, they say, and charge organic prices, explaining their growing methods to customers, most of whom accept it. "What we don't know is how many people pass by our booth because it doesn't say 'certified organic' on the sign," Benson says.

Buyer beware: Local labels

not always what they claim But farmers committed to organic in principle and in practice caution against something they call "green washing." Words like "local and sustainable," "natural" and "no spray," commonly used by nonorganic growers at farmers markets and natural foods grocery chains, are muddy and vague, says Scott Frost of Nature's Fountain farm near Albany. Anyone can make claims, he says, and many do, without practices to back it up. "I want some sort of proof there, especially when it comes to my own health."

Susan Sokol Blosser, whose Dundee winery was awarded full organic certification last year, says the rules forced her to become a better farmer. And it's a way to counter the growing trend that she sees toward green washing, where words about sustainability and actions don't always match up. "The classic is the SUV with the salmon plates," she says. Certified organic, at any size, means an auditor ensures rigorous rules are followed.

Sure, industrial organic isn't perfect, but it's the best we've got, Sokol Blosser says. "Having gone through the process to get organically certified, I have tremendous respect for any business that can put organic on the label. I know what it takes, and it takes a lot."

Local, though, says Kane of Ecotrust, isn't the end of a conversation, but a beginning, one that starts by allowing the region's farmers to stay on the land.

"You're never going to convert local farmers to organic, unless you keep them farming. A lot of people have said that -- you can have conversations about production practices, once we've saved the family farm."

And little local and big organic can, and should, co-exist, says Bob Scowcroft of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, a nonprofit that educates farmers and the public about organic practices. "Among our 'poets,' " Scowcroft says, "there are passionate discussions of distance traveled, energy used, and who owns the farm and what labor practices they have. I say, keep on writing the poetry.

"I don't think we're yet mature enough to change the entire food system. But we certainly appreciate the visionaries telling us what it would look like."

Just how realistic is a local system for feeding the masses? It depends on where you live, author Pollan says. Here in the Northwest, it's possible. Not so in New York City, where population density is high and farmland far from the urban core. "I think we're going to need many different food chains. Nature never puts all her eggs in one basket. And we shouldn't do that with how we're feeding ourselves."

Next up: Making choices that balance health, values and a budget. Savvy shoppers show us how they do it. Read about it June 20.

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LOCAL VS. ORGANIC: Making Choices

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Organic food used to mean small family farms. Now, more farms are industrial-sized and global, and more shoppers look to locally grown food, conventional or somewhere short of organic standards, as an alternative. Here's how the two stack up:

Little local farm/Big organic farm

Closer usually = fresher / Food traveled farther, might not be as fresh

Less fuel used, less pollution from transit, but may have been grown with petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides / Higher energy use, emissions produced in transit

Pesticide use could be none, a little or a lot / Food producers hew to strict set of rules, food contains few pesticide residues, animals free of hormones and antibiotics.

Local farm preservation, greenspace close to home / More pesticide-free acres worldwide, cleaner water and soil

Fresh foods abundant during growing season, but in winter, get used to cabbage / With global sourcing, good-quality seasonal produce year-round

Often cheaper to buy / Cost is coming down. Proponents of organic say cheap, nonorganic food costs society more in environmental cleanup and future health-care bills.

At farm stands and farmers markets, you can find varieties bred for flavor, not shipping / Bred for global distribution, but widely available, convenient

Opportunity to meet a farmer, ask about growing methods. Some local growers certified "sustainable" by Food Alliance or Salmon Safe. / Rigorous national standards, lengthy certification process, inspected by a third party

Dollars stay close to home, small farmers stay in business / Big chains seek organic supplies from large growers outside our region, and increasingly, overseas. Many large brands owned by multinationals. (A few national brands, such as Organic Valley milk, source locally from scores of small- to medium-sizes family farms.)

Secure food supply for our region / Global system means our bread basket can be affected by global politics

Farmers market as food lab: kids learn what carrot tops look like, that rocket is something you can eat. / Long live the one-minute organic salad: open bag, apply dressing

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