

Creating a Healthy, Sustainable Food System: Is Organic Really the Answer?

<http://www.fairfoodnetwork.org/connect/blog/creating-healthy-sustainable-food-system-organic-really-answer>

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Part 2 of a series of blogs based on the book:

Fair Food: Growing a Healthy, Sustainable Food System for All.

The short answer is: "Partly." Most of us who were farming organically back in the 1960s and '70s or who were involved in the organic food movement in one way or another were conscious of the principles I am suggesting for a redesigned food system: equity, diversity, ecological integrity, economic viability (www.fairfoodbook.org). Many present-day organic farmers are also working hard to continue to incorporate the principles of ecology and diversity into their systems. Along the way, organic food has become a growing market niche, providing a price premium for those farmers who carry the USDA organic certification, and big business for food processors, distributors, and retailers.

In order for a product to have the USDA organic certification label, it has to be produced and processed without using any of the prohibited materials that are listed in the [USDA organic standards rule](#).

It also means that the farmer used organic seeds or seedlings that were produced with organic methods, unless such seedlings were unavailable. When you purchase a food product with the organic label, you can be assured that the farmer or processor did not use substances prohibited by the USDA, including synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, fumigants, solid waste from sewage disposal, and genetically modified seeds. It is the best assurance we have, short of growing our own food (or trusting the farmer who did), that there's no pesticide residue or that the products are not genetically modified.



What we can't be sure of is that our purchase is supporting fair treatment of farmworkers or that the price premium you pay for organic foods is making its way back down the supply chain and being distributed equitably. This is especially the case with organic foods grown in places such as China or Chile, where there may be even less control and less transparency about production practices. I buy organic produce at times, usually when it is grown closer to home, and I think doing so is a good idea for anyone who wants to minimize the risk of pesticide residue on their food or who wants to support organic farmers. We just need to realize that the organic label alone can't provide all of the information we need if our intention is to support a fair food system with our food purchases.

As a conscious consumer, you can ask your grocer to post information about the producer of the fresh food you buy, which can help bring more awareness to farming practices. The issues of healthy working conditions for farmworkers and diversity of production techniques leading to soil depletion are under the radar of the organic certification label which consequently does not assure us that organic food is fair food. But we have come a long way from the days when we had no information about the food we purchase and feed to our children.

There are other certification systems that are more informative about the practices used to produce the food, and they hold some promise in helping consumers "vote with their food dollars." One of the longest-standing and most effective is the label from the Food Alliance (www.foodalliance.org), which has developed a certification program and a Food Alliance seal that can be placed on products approved by its program. The organization asks growers about their practices related to fertilizer and pesticide use, soil and water conservation, humane treatment of animals, and just and fair treatment of workers. When shoppers see the Food Alliance label (now found primarily in the Pacific Northwest, but slowly spreading to other parts of the country), they can be assured the product was produced in a system that embodies many of the principles I advocate for a redesigned food system. So yes, by all means, buy organic, but also look for assurances that the food is produced in a manner that is kind to the earth and its creatures and fair to the workers who produced it.

Tags |

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