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## More farmers are coming to market with certifications

By [Monica Eng](#), Tribune Newspapers

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Visitors to Green City Market's first outdoor farmers market last Wednesday may have noticed something shiny and new as they perused bundles of spring asparagus, juicy stalks of rhubarb and piles of fresh greens.

They were spiffy signs clipped to each vendor's stall listing the farm's name, its story and its distance from the market. But the sign also indicated what kind of third-party sustainability certification the vendor had earned.

The vast majority of GCM farmers have already voluntarily earned certification — under one of seven national programs that monitor animal welfare, growing practices and labor practices. But by next year, certification will become a requirement to remain in the independent Lincoln Park market.

"We wanted to make the market as transparent as possible," said Prairie Grass chef and GCM board co-chair Sarah Stegner. "When you say a farm is sustainable, it means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, and this (third-party certification system) is very clear."

Despite the mistaken belief that all farmers market vendors hold organic certification, sustainability requirements at farmers markets are rare. In fact, when the rules go into effect in 2012, Green City says it will be the only market in the country with such a policy.

But it won't be the only market in the Chicago area with certified farmers. More than a dozen certified farmers sell in multiple markets in the area (see listing online at [chicagotribune.com/sustain](http://chicagotribune.com/sustain) ).

And though many consumers understand the USDA Organic label, they may be less

familiar with some of the other GCM-approved certifications, including Food Alliance Certified, Certified Naturally Grown and Certified Humanely Raised.

What exactly do these certifications mean to consumers?

For many consumers and the GCM board, sustainability certifications offer concrete assurances that farmers are taking specific steps to protect the land, animal welfare and workers. But that doesn't mean you should automatically write off a farmer for not having, for example, USDA organic certification, some warn.

GCM farm forager Dave Rand notes that it's incredibly difficult, for example, to grow organic peaches in the Midwest because of pest and climate challenges. So a peach grower might opt for Food Alliance certification, which requires integrated pest management strategies that minimize pesticide use but allow it when necessary.

Three Sisters farmer Tracey Vowell said that she prefers the Certified Naturally Grown program because inspections are carried out by fellow farmers rather than certification inspectors. She finds this process fosters community and best-practices sharing rather than just requiring farmers to fill out paperwork.

"As part of the Naturally Grown group this spring, I have seen four other people's farms," she said. "This gives me a great opportunity to learn new things and get new ideas on how to do things better."

Still, if you have specific questions about growing practices, Rand says talk to the farmer.

"Don't be shy," he says. "They should be happy to talk about things like their pest management strategies. Some might have the capacity to handpick beetles off their peach tree, for instance, and others may not. You're trying to learn about what you are putting in your body and how someone is strategically dealing with those kinds of issues."

Vowell agrees that starting a conversation with the farmer may be better than any official certification.

"You need to develop a relationship with your farmer," she says. "In conversation, you can figure out very quickly if someone fits in your realm of sustainability or if they are just doing the things to meet certain standards and nothing more."

**What they monitor**

Here are abbreviated definitions of various sustainability programs, as supplied by Green City Market:

**American Grassfed Association:** A national multispecies organization dedicated to preserving the integrity of purely grass-fed operations through promotion and education. Certified Grassfed means animals were fed a lifetime diet of 100 percent forage, raised on pasture and not in confinement, and never treated with hormones or antibiotics.

**American Humane Certified:** The most basic criteria require that animals have clean and sufficient food and water, limited stress, humane conditions, access to fresh pasture, and trained and conscientious caregivers.

**Animal Welfare Approved:** Audits and certifies family farms raising their animals humanely, outdoors on pasture or range.

**Certified Humane Raised and Handled:** Requires the humane treatment of farm animals from birth through slaughter.

**Certified Naturally Grown:** Certifies that farmers don't use synthetic herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, antibiotics, hormones or genetically modified organisms. CNG livestock are raised mostly on pasture and with space for freedom of movement, and their feed is grown without synthetic inputs.

**Food Alliance Certified:** Certifies farms, ranches and food handlers for sustainable agricultural and facility management practices. By choosing Food Alliance Certified products, consumers and commercial food buyers can be assured they are supporting safe and fair working conditions, humane treatment of animals and good environmental stewardship.

**USDA Organic:** Requires that farmers respond to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance and conserve biodiversity.

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