
Understanding Organic Food

Many home gardeners say they grow “organic” vegetables and fruits. Depending on one’s knowledge of organic production, this may or may not be true. In most cases, foods labeled and sold as organic must be certified as such. This includes certification of the grower(s), handler(s), and processor(s) by USDA-accredited certifying agents. National Organic Program (NOP) regulations require that agricultural products labeled as such originate from farms or handling operations certified by a State or private entity that has been accredited by USDA.

Growers producing organically grown food and fiber cannot use conventional pesticides, petroleum-based fertilizers, or sewage sludge-based fertilizers. Animals raised on an organic farm must be fed certified organic feed and given access to the outdoors. They are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. The NOP regulations also prohibit the use of genetic engineering and ionizing radiation during organic production and handling.

In theory, organic food production relies on creating an environment that reduces the population of potential pests (insects, diseases, weeds, or parasites) and promotes plant/animal health to increase resistance to predators and pathogens. This requires that organic growers provide the right soil conditions, select healthy plants, and follow proper cultural practices. It also requires a gardener to scout the growing area regularly – checking for pests and addressing problems while they are still manageable. These are things that most growers do regardless of their organic status.

Producers and handling (processing) operations that follow the NOP standards and sell less than \$5,000 a year in organic agricultural products are exempt from certification. They may label their products organic if they abide by the NOP standards, but they cannot display the USDA Organic seal. Many small growers that use organic practices label their products as “pesticide and synthetic fertilizer free” to avoid confusion and legal issues. Small scale growers rely more heavily on their relationship with the local customer to ensure quality products.

Certified organic production entails an initial certification by qualified inspectors and attentive recordkeeping by the grower. Growers moving from conventional to organic production are given a three-year transition period to become certified as organic. Transitional growers must be inspected and demonstrate compliance with all requirements for certified organic production during the transition period.

The NOP also has labeling regulations which should be understood by consumers. These labeling standards are based on the percentage of organic ingredients in the product. Products labeled “100 percent organic” must contain only organically produced ingredients. Products labeled “organic” must consist of at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients. Products meeting the requirements for “100 percent organic” and “organic” may display the USDA Organic seal.

Processed products that contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients can use the phrase “made with organic ingredients” and list up to three of the organic ingredients or food groups on the principal display panel. For example, soup made with at least 70 percent organic ingredients and only organic vegetables may be labeled either “made with organic peas, potatoes, and carrots,” or “made with organic vegetables.” However, the USDA Organic seal cannot be used anywhere on the package.

When you purchase organic produce, it is not necessarily pesticide free. Pesticides include insecticides to kill insects, herbicides to kill weeds and fungicides to kill diseases. Some are made from natural products (organic) and some from chemicals. Organic produce could have been sprayed many times with an organic pesticide. Because organic products break down quickly, more applications may be needed with an organic pesticide than with a chemical pesticide. Some organic pesticides are more toxic to humans than chemical pesticides.

Additional Resource:

[USDA Organic](#)

United States Department of Agriculture

January 15, 2024

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