



**Why Buy Organic:  
Good for the Soil, Good for You**

By Gerard L. Guillory, M.D.

Patients often ask whether organic produce is worth the extra money. The short answer is yes. Always buy organic produce if it is available and if your budget allows for it.

There are a number of compelling reasons why organic produce is worth the price. But before I elaborate, allow me to relate a personal story that, in part, explains my interest in this subject.

In 1970, when I was about 10 years old, my older sister Susan came home to visit the family in our native state of Louisiana. Susan, then 20, was living in New York City and had brought with her some rather exotic gifts: organic brown rice, miso, lentils and other foods that we were convinced must have come from another planet.

When we were growing up, only hippies ate yogurt. Whole wheat bread was hard to find. Tofu was still found largely only in Japan. We all thought Susan had gone off the deep end, but she insisted that natural foods were good for you and good for the planet.

She was so convinced of this that a few years after her visit, Susan and her then-husband started building a chain of natural foods supermarkets in the Boston area. They became pioneers in the whole/natural foods industry and, as it turned out, Susan hadn't gone off the deep end. She was just ahead of her time.

Today, my sister remains actively involved in the organic-foods movement and, among other things, is a member of the Nutrition Roundtable at the Harvard School of Public Health. Susan, you were right, and this article is dedicated to you.

The term *organic* arises from the notion that the soil and the farm are, in essence, living organisms. Numerous studies have shown a relationship between healthy soil and healthy populations. A great read on this topic is "Healthy at 100," by John Robbins. Also worth picking up are "The Omnivore's Dilemma," by Michael Pollan, and "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle," by Barbara Kingsolver.

The organic movement isn't new. Sir Albert Howard, a British botanist born in 1873 who is often referred to as the father of organic agriculture, once said that the "health of soil, plant, animal and man is one and indivisible." This remains an underlying principle of organic farming. More recently, John Reganold, a professor of soil sciences at Washington State University, said that "conventional farmers feed their plants, organic farmers feed the soil."

Organic produce, grown on soil that has been composted or that uses natural fertilizers, is healthier and contains a wider range of nutrients and trace elements than chemically fertilized plants contain. Although synthetic fertilizers stimulate rapid growth, they don't replenish the soil with the range of nutrients that our bodies need.

That in itself is a compelling reason to buy organic produce. There are other good reasons as well:

Organically grown produce largely excludes the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.

Organic farming practices are better for the environment. These practices help preserve topsoil, which is important at a time when soil erosion is becoming a crisis. The International Organic Farmers Organization maintains that the "rule of organic agriculture, whether in farming, processing, distribution, or consumption, is to sustain and enhance the health of ecosystems and organisms from the smallest in the soil to human beings." It's all about the soil.

Organic farming initially was a grassroots effort by organic farmers who embraced a philosophy of biodynamics and sustainability. An example of this involves the natural symbiotic relationship among the grass, the sun and cattle. Through photosynthesis, the grass uses the sun's energy to grow; the cattle then eat the grass; and the manure produced by the cattle fertilizes the grass.

As organic farming has matured, public uncertainty about what is truly organic has led to a push for a formal organic certification process. This has helped facilitate large-scale production of organically grown produce, which represents a departure from what many organic farmers had intended. Unfortunately, some small-farm operators who use organic farming practices have found that they lack the financial resources to obtain official organic certification.

That said, the organic produce available today represents a step in the right direction for both the consumer and the soil. Buy organic when possible. Try to buy foods that are in season. Remember that it takes a lot of fuel to import organically grown asparagus from Argentina in the middle of winter. Get to know your local farmers and support your local farmers' market.

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