



GOING

organic

What you need to know about what organic means today, why it costs more, and when to choose it

WRITTEN BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL | PHOTOS BY WINTER CAPLANSON

You made a list. Checked the fridge and the pantry twice. Asked your kids for the umpteenth time if there was anything special they wanted, and now you're at the grocery store staring at the produce signs. It's the classic food shopping quandary: to go organic or not to go organic?

Interest in organic foods has grown rapidly over the past few years as consumers worry about the effects of conventional agriculture on their health and the health of the planet. In 2020, U.S. sales of organic grew 12.4% year-over-year, breaking the \$60 billion mark, according to the Organic Trade Association, and while sales growth was lower in 2021 compared to 2020, it still grew.

Yet when you're staring at those signs in the market and noting that organic is often more expensive, it's easy to wonder, is it worth it? Here's what to know about what organic means today, why it costs more and when to choose organic.

What does organic even mean today?

Unfortunately, organic can mean different things depending on where you're shopping and the specific label you're looking at and it's essential to know the differences. At the supermarket, you've likely spotted the USDA Organic label on everything from bananas to chicken. Regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), it's one of the more popular labels you'll find on food (and, yes, I know there are so many food labels it's easy for our eyes to glaze over when spotting them). But, the USDA certifies that food labeled USDA Organic is free of chemicals, most pesticides, sewage, sludge, and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Beyond the produce aisle, this means that animal proteins were fed 100% organic feed and forage, not administered antibiotics or hormones, and had access to the outdoors. For other foods, such as packaged goods, it means they are free of artificial preservatives, colors, and flavors.

You'll also see food and often wine labeled "Made With Organic Ingredients," which means the food contains at least 70% certified organic ingredients. Food made with less than 70% organic ingredients may list organic ingredients on the packaging label.

It's a common misconception, however, that organic food contains no pesticides.

"The national organic program does allow for the use of approved pesticides," Eric Vukicevich, a professor of sustainable agriculture at Connecticut College. "The difference is that these organic pesticides must be naturally-derived as opposed to being synthesized chemically as in the case of many of the pesticides you hear about in the news. For the consumer, the difference is that, although there may be pesticides used on organic produce, it is the synthetics that persist longer in the environment and that have been linked to disease."

It's also worth noting that many small farmers that sell their products at farmers' markets or through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs may practice organic farming without going through the hurdle or the expense of getting certified by the USDA.

Is organic better for the planet?

Agriculture is responsible for more than a third of global greenhouse emissions, according to a study



published in *Nature Food* in 2021. Yet, the U.N.'s International Panel on Climate Change believes that sustainable agriculture practices, including organic and regenerative farming, could dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture. That's partly because one of the main ideas behind organic is to do no harm.

"When we farm with reverence for the soil seeking to do as little harm to the planet as possible, we not only boost the health of the plants we are growing, but we invigorate the health of the communities of people eating our food," Emma Sutphen of Adesa Farm said.

While the North Stonington-based farm is not certified organic due partly to expense, Sutphen and partner Zachary Murdoch grow various vegetables following organic and regenerative practices. They sell their produce and eggs primarily through a spring and summer CSA and to Nana's Bakery, Stone Acres Farm, and Terra Firma Farm.

“I grew up never knowing the damage of tillage practices, so no-till, regenerative farming really opened my eyes to a new way of being. All of our vegetables are grown in permanent, no-till beds,” Sutphen, who learned about regenerative farming practices from Coogan Farm manager Craig Floyd and farmers and growers through the Bionutrient Food Association, said. The goal of Bionutrient Food Association growers is to improve the nutritional quality of food by improving their soil’s health.

The reduction—if not the elimination—of pesticide use in organic farming benefits pollinators, birds, and other wildlife that live near farms. Organic farming also supports soil health, biodiversity, and often reduces pollution.

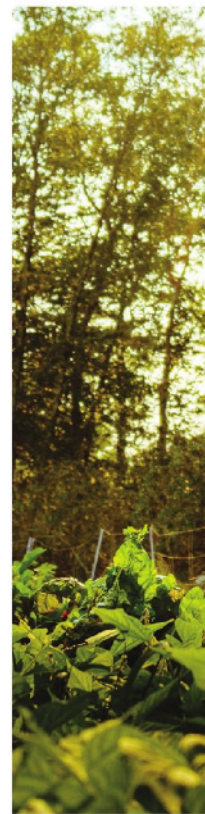
“Large scale, industrial farms are destroying the planet,” Sutphen said. “It’s easy to turn a blind eye, but one of the simplest ways to support the health of the environment is through supporting local organic farmers. Not only are you supporting shorter supply chains, but you’re also supporting families who really care about the Earth.”

Alright, but is organic better for my family and me?

Whether or not organic food is better for you than conventional grown has been an ongoing debate for decades, and evidence is slowly beginning to show that, yes, organic food is often healthier.

When it comes to children, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has stated that while there’s no evidence (yet) that consuming an organic diet is nutritionally better, the less exposure to pesticides, the better for still-developing brains.

For those of us with developed brains, an increasing number of studies show that eating an organic diet reduces exposure to pesticides. Other studies have linked numerous health issues to pesticide exposure, including headaches, cancer, liver disease and more. Organic animals raised without antibiotics and hormones are less likely to carry drug-resistant bacteria. Antibiotic resistance is one of the biggest threats to global health, according to the World Health Organization.





Here's a baker's dozen list of the worst foods to buy non-organic

- Animal proteins
- Strawberries
- Spinach
- Kale, collard greens, and mustard greens
- Nectarines
- Apples
- Grapes
- Cherries
- Peaches
- Pears
- Bell peppers and hot peppers
- Celery
- Tomatoes

Why does organic cost more?

Simply put, organic food often costs more because it costs more to produce.

“Aside from the cost of organic certification and record-keeping, some of this has to do with the cost of inputs, assuming inputs are purchased from off-farm,” said Vukicevich. “Organic farming also generally requires more eyes on the ground if cultural and biological controls for pests are to be effective and to perform the cultural controls. The cost of labor is usually the greatest operating cost for a commercial farm, so a system that has a greater eyes-to-acres ratio will cost more to run.”

Some final shopping tips

One of the things that make our little corner of the world such a special place to call home is the variety of local food produced here. While many small farmers might not be certified organic, most follow farming practices that are good for the planet and human health. If you can shop at a farmers market or farm stand you can ask directly about the farming philosophy in a way you can't when purchasing goods from the supermarket.

“I wish that consumers knew how easy it is to grow food in your backyard,” said Sutphen said, “I also wish they knew how much it means to local farmers when you support their growing practices by choosing to buy from farmers’ markets or enroll in a CSA program.” 🍷

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