

# Local AND (Not Versus) Organic

By Stephanie Davio

The local food movement and the organic food movement must become one, as we face the challenges of food safety, environmental protection, water quality, worker safety, and a reduced carbon footprint. When it comes to local and organic food, we are not debating rivals vying for a spot in your salad bowl. Rather, we are looking for the best option—both local and organic. We need to encourage smaller, biologically diverse farms that can deliver both.

## Reasons to Become Certified

Eating organic food is paramount to reducing and ultimately eliminating toxic pesticide contamination. It is healthier for the farmworkers who grow and harvest the food, and keeps pollutants out of our water, air and food. Organic food can feed us and keep us healthy without producing the toxic effects of chemical agriculture.

The USDA organic label means that the farmer has not used prohibited materials, such as toxic herbicides, insecticides or fertilizers, for at least three years prior to planting and harvest. They must keep meticulous records of how their farm is managed, which keeps things transparent. All of this is verified by a third party to make sure that what the farmer is claiming is true.

## Benefits of Eating Locally

Local, organic farms are good for communities, keeping everyone connected to the place where their food is grown and in touch with the seasons. There is a limited amount of good farm land, and organic farms keep this land in production when it might otherwise be developed. This land provides wildlife habitat, food pro-

duction, and preserves agricultural landscapes, all while avoiding toxic contamination that occurs from conventional farms.

Locally grown foods provide some distinct advantages to products that are shipped from afar. For one, they are picked when they are ripe and therefore retain the best flavor and have the highest sugar content, which some nutritionists argue make them healthier. A classic example are tomatoes, which are delicate and don't travel well once ripe. In order to ship them across country, growers must harvest them while they are still green, sometimes treating them with ethylene so they will ripen, or turn red, en route. Ask any self-proclaimed foodie: there is no comparison between a fresh, ripe local tomato and an off-season one from the supermarket that was shipped across country.

Another argument for buying local is that it provides direct support for farmers and helps strengthen the local economy. Farmers receive a much larger percentage of the food dollar when they sell at a market as opposed to selling through a grocery store. This also results in local re-circulation of money: one study found that purchasing locally resulted in 14-20% greater re-spending locally than purchasing from non-local stores (Sustainable Seattle, 2008).

## Environmental Impact of Organic vs. Local

The fact is, however, not everything you buy can or has to be local. If you can get it locally, then you should buy local organic. However, there's no reason to try to grow certain things in climates that don't support the crop, making it almost necessary to use chemicals.

Reducing carbon-based fuels used for shipping food is often cited as a major advantage of local foods when it comes to environ-



mental impact. Nationwide, food travels an average of 1,500 miles before reaching the final consumer, while most farmers markets and locavores harvest food in a 150-mile radius. While this evidence is clear, when you throw organic into the mix, the data is not so one-sided. An analysis by Tropicana found that the number one contributor to its carbon footprint is the production and application of chemicals to their orange groves, not transportation or manufacturing (Tropicana Products Inc., 2010). According to the Rodale Institute, the gold standard is organic and local, but when in doubt always choose organic. Local conventional food, after all, contaminates your local environment with toxic pesticides, while organic food keeps chemicals out of the land, water and our bodies wherever it is grown.

### Talking to Your Farmers!

Other than the taste of fresh fruits and vegetables, one of the most rewarding things about buying locally is having the chance to know the person behind the product. In a world where factory farmed chicken nuggets are staples and ingredient lists are unreadable, farmers markets provide a unique opportunity for the consumer to have a healthy relationship with their food. It is a chance to know your farmer and understand where your food comes from.

Just because a farm is not certified organic does not mean you should automatically avoid purchasing from them. However, without certification, the claim of organic holds very little weight since it has not been verified by a third party. Talk to the farmer about why his/her farm is not certified, and make your own decisions about whether you feel comfortable with their growing practices.

Remember, the farmers at your market are your neighbors, and what they spray on the fields impacts your backyard too. Educate yourself about the dangers of pesticides and the benefits of organic, and don't be afraid to talk to them about it. Be friendly, but communicate to them why you want them to go organic. With your wallet, show them that consumers are willing to pay more for a clean food supply and environment.

### Conclusion

In a perfect world, all of our food would come from small, biologically diverse organic farms. The only way to achieve this reality is to use your purchasing power by shopping both locally and organically whenever possible and talking to your farmers to demand organic food. In the end, it's more important to buy organically grown food than local food produced with toxic chemicals.

Organic practices that conform to key standards for land management, as established in the *Organic Foods Production Act*, seek to incorporate the practices that green consumers want to lead healthy lifestyles and contribute to a safe environment for their families and children. Consumers are the driving force in ensuring the growth of organic as a response to polluting chemical-intensive practices that undermine the health of people and the planet. With the melding of organic standards and local production, consumers are able to support the systems that will ensure the sustainability of our ecosystem.

Visit the *Beyond Pesticides Organic Food* website for more information on the health and environmental benefits of eating organically, [www.beyondpesticides.org/organicfood](http://www.beyondpesticides.org/organicfood).

### Reasons Small Farmers Don't Choose the Organic Label

- **Too much paperwork:** Paperwork varies with each business. But, keeping better records can help farmers and producers identify and solve problems more readily, which can lead to better land management, increased yields, and ultimately more profitability.
- **Production is too expensive:** One reason organic is such a fast growing industry is because of consumer willingness to pay premiums for certified organic goods. But even without the premium, studies have shown that the reduced costs of inputs make it cheaper than managing a conventional operation.
- **Certification is too expensive:** Small farms (making less than \$5,000/year on organic products) are exempt from getting certification, and the costs of certification varies by certifying agent, state, size of the farm, etc. Farmers are encouraged to shop around for a certifying agent that will be the most cost-effective for their operation.

### Things You Should Ask Your Farmer if They Are Not Organic

- Why do they choose not be certified organic?
- How do they manage pests, diseases and weeds?
- How often do they spray and what pesticides do they use?
- How do they fertilize their farm?

