

# Organic is healthier and, if done right, less expensive

By Liana Hoodes

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The recent syndicated column attacking the value of organics has two big problems. First, it is suspiciously similar to a national effort by chemical companies to discredit organic. Second, and more important, organic food is better for your health, and organic agriculture is better for the environment. Which isn't to say that local isn't important, too.

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But back to organic. "Organic" is two fairly different things: a system of agriculture based on soil health and natural systems and a marketing label controlled (not always well) by the government.

The labeling of food as organic is controlled by a federal regulation that provides significant checks and balances. When working properly, the organic food you get has been carefully produced largely without the use of chemicals. Yet sometimes, thanks to profit motives, that label you see in the grocery store, while regulated, is not foolproof.

With the organic agriculture system, "There's no fooling Mother Nature." The proven values of organic agriculture — increased nutrients, higher yields, better ability to withstand drought and floods and less pollution — happen when organic is done correctly, not solely with a label slapped on.

What are some values of organic?

- Pesticides and health effects — A National Academy of Sciences study noted that "low-level pesticide exposure can cause serious, developmental risks to infants and children, some with serious lifelong consequences."

Also, recent USDA data shows that more than 90 percent of the samples of conventionally grown apples, peaches, pears, strawberries and celery had pesticide residues, and conventionally grown crops were six times as likely as organic to contain multiple pesticide residues.

- Difference in nutrients — Some nutrients, such as antioxidants, have been proven to be higher in organic foods.
- Saving family farms and the environment — The Organic Center noted, "Overall energy use is much greater on conventional farms largely because of their reliance on pesticides and nitrogen

fertilizer. On a conventional corn farm, these two inputs account for about 43 percent of total energy use.

"By growing U.S. organic food consumption to 10 percent by 2010, we will eliminate 2.9 billion barrels of imported oil annually."

Recent long-term studies at the Rodale Institute have shown that organic soils are more resistant to both drought and floods, and yields in most products are equal or better in organic. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that worldwide average yield of all organic products are 130 percent that of conventional.

A recent UNFAO symposium suggests that organic agriculture may indeed help feed the world, through efficient energy use, lower inputs, and greater diversity.

- True costs — Given these facts, a true cost-benefit analysis — where all the costs of our food are taken into account — may find organic the least expensive alternative. Yet its higher cost in the grocery store is a fact to be reckoned with, and is a direct result of warped federal food policy that shortchanges all our local farmers, organic and conventional. We must demand that federal food policy stop subsidizing industrial foods and help all to afford nutritious food.
- What about local? Local fresh foods (organic and conventional) clearly have more nutrients for better health than food that has traveled thousands of miles. Local, family farmed food means you can meet the farmer, and you can see how they grow.

And just as important — buying locally produced food supports our communities and supports those farmers who provide us with good food and open space. That speaks to health and environmental protection too.

If we want more local organic farms, we need to provide our farmers the tools. Research into organic systems could help conventional as well as organic farmers to use less pesticides. Yet the USDA spends less than 1 percent of all research dollars on organic research.

It should be the goal of our government policies to move all agriculture to be safer, environmentally sound, as well as more profitable. Organic and family farm agriculture both deserve our support with our purchasing dollars, and from our federal government.

Liana Hoodes works on organic policy issues for the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture in Pine Bush, where she has worked for the past 12 years. She has grown food and children organically in the Hudson Valley for well over 20 years.