

Organic Foods: What Do We Mean?

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Do the terms *organic*, *natural* and *health*, in relation to food products and produce, confuse you? Increasingly, consumers seek a health-conscious, back-to-basics lifestyle, and food is one means to that end. One problem is that the meanings of the words *organic*, *natural* and *health* are unclear, and their use raises some questions about the level of authenticity and commitment on behalf of the manufacturer or processor of the product. However, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has implemented a set of consistent national standards for producing and processing foods to be labeled *organic* and *health*.

The word *organic* has a specific meaning in agricultural terms. Conventional agricultural production may use synthetic (human-made) pesticides. Pesticides are chemicals that reduce or prevent weeds, insects, or disease. Synthetic fertilizers are often used to nourish crops. Farmers grow and process organically produced food without using synthetic chemicals. Organic does not mean pesticide-free however, as many consumers believe. Organic agriculture may rely on the use of naturally occurring pesticides and other agricultural practices to provide insect, disease, and weed control. Composts, legumes, manure, and minerals provide nutrients for crop growth and promote the biological health of the soil. According to the USDA, "organic food is produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations. Organic meat, poultry, egg, and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic food is produced without using most conventional pesticides; petroleum-based fertilizers, or sewage sludge based fertilizers; bioengineering or ionizing radiation."

Congress passed the Organic Food Protection Act in 1990 and the final rule took effect on October 21, 2002. Previously, a multitude of farm and processor certification programs, each with individual production standards

and labeling, led to confusion. Now, one national standard must be followed, and certification distinguishes organic foods as being produced and processed under set criteria.

Farmers apply to become certified to sell organic produce and products. Certifiers operate under USDA supervision. The USDA National Organic Program requires all but the smallest farms and food processors (under \$5000 in gross annual sales of organic products) to become certified. The certification process includes preparing a comprehensive plan showing how crops will be grown, or livestock raised, and an annual inspection and update. If farmers use allowed practices, they are certified as an organic farm. All labeled certified organic products sold by certified producers and processors must include the name of the certifier, and may include the USDA seal, the certifiers seal, or both. Thirty-six months' use of organic production methods must pass before their farm can be advertised as *organic* or use the *USDA Organic* seal on produce and products.



The *USDA Organic* seal can only be used on produce and products that contain a minimum of 95% organic ingredients. Certified farmers may use the seal only if they have followed organic production practices for 36 months.

Handling and processing companies that deliver products or produce to markets and restaurants must also be certified. Whether the foods are grown in the United States or imported from other countries, their products must be labeled accordingly depending on the percentage of organic ingredients in the product. The following four labels are to be used to help consumers who are buying organic products:

- **100 Percent Organic** indicates the product is made from 100 percent organic ingredients (excluding salt and water). These products can display this phrase



on the front display label and may include the *USDA Organic* seal.

- **Organic** contains at least 95 percent organic ingredients. All of the organic ingredients must be listed in the ingredient statement on the information panel. Any additional non-agricultural ingredients must be listed on the *USDA National List of Allowed Synthetic and Prohibited Non-Synthetic Substances* or non-organically produced ingredients that were not available in an organic form. The front display label may include the *USDA Organic* seal, because use of the seal is voluntary.
- **Made with Organic Ingredients** are processed foods that contain at least 70 percent and up to 95 percent organic ingredients, excluding water and salt. The label must list up to three of the organic ingredients or food groups on the principal display panel. For example, vegetarian stew made with at least 70 percent organic ingredients and only organic vegetables may be labeled “stew made with organic potatoes, beans, and carrots” or “stew made with organic vegetables”. The percentage of organic content and the certifying agency seal or mark may be used on the principal display label. However, the *USDA Organic* seal may not appear anywhere on the package and the word organic cannot appear on the front display panel.
- **Products containing less than 70 percent organic ingredients** can list them individually on the information label, but cannot use the *USDA Organic* seal or term organic anywhere on the front display panel.

Any of the above labels require that the certifying agent of the final product must be displayed on the information panel.

No restrictions exist on the use of the other labeling claims such as “no drugs or growth hormones,” “free range,” etc.

There is nothing in USDA's National Organic Standards defining or regulating the use of the term “natural.” USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) regulates the term “natural” on meat and poultry labels. FSIS defines “natural” as a product containing no artificial ingredient or added color and is only minimally processed (a process which does not fundamentally alter the raw product). The label must explain the use of the term natural (such as ‘no added colorings or artificial ingredients’ or ‘minimally processed’). You will find this definition and many other labeling terms including “free range” at the FSIS web site: www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/lablterm.htm.

For information on the National Organic Program and labeling, check the web site at www.ams.usda.gov/nop. In New Jersey, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture became the state's organic certification program in September 2003. The program was formally operated by NOFA-NJ, the Northeast Organic Farming Association—New Jersey chapter. The Department of Agriculture will certify organic producers and handlers, and inspect to ensure compliance with new federal regulations mandating that any organically grown agricultural product must meet U.S. Department of Agriculture standards if it is labeled as organic—which the private certification agencies do not have. The legislation also included a provision that will assist farmers in expanding into organic production. Farmers who are shifting to organic production and are in the process of completing the three-year qualifying period will have the ability to market their products as “transitional”—enabling them to realize the increased prices this niche market supports.

Contact your family and consumer sciences educator, county agricultural agent, New Jersey Department of Agriculture, www.state.nj.us/agriculture/ or NOFA-NJ, www.nofanj.org for additional information or to receive a list of certified producers in New Jersey.

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