

Organic: To Buy or Not to Buy?

Let's face it. While eating 100% organic food is an ideal many strive for, a variety of circumstances (such as financial constraints or simply convenience) make it impossible not to sometimes fall short. But how do you juggle the desire to minimize your consumption of pesticides with limited organic produce selections and your dwindling pocketbook?

The Dirty Dozen (and the Clean 15)

Luckily for us, the Environmental Working Group has put together a list of the most heavily contaminated fruits and vegetables. Their research has found that those eating from the Dirty Dozen list consume an average of ten pesticides a day. These are the fruits and vegetables you'll want to always buy organic, or otherwise avoid entirely. So make sure your spinach is organic, Popeye.

Vegetables included in the dirty dozen are celery, spinach, kale, bell peppers and potatoes. Fruits that are sprayed heavily are much more prevalent and include peaches, strawberries, apples, blueberries, nectarines, cherries and imported grapes.

On the other end of the spectrum, they've also listed fifteen of the cleanest foods. If you find yourself in a pickle, there's some non-organic foods that are still sprayed, but less heavily. Luckily, Paleo diet favorites such as onions, asparagus, avocados, cabbage, and sweet potatoes are included, along with eggplant, sweet corn and sweet peas. Fruits on the list? Pineapples, mangos, kiwi, canteloupe, watermelon, grapefruit and honeydew melons.

The Co-op Advantage

Say you still want to buy organic without spending the

rest of your paycheck on food, but you're really far away from a Trader Joe's and your local chain grocer has a dismal organic section. Then what do you do? One option is to try to find a co-op that's part of the Co-op Advantage. This is a strategy that I use. My local food co-op is wonderful, but I can't afford to shop there. They are not members of the co-op advantage, but a co-op one town over is. We save at least thirty bucks a month by shopping there.

It's not a fail-proof method. Some member co-ops are still overpriced in certain cities, and some states do not have any member stores. However, it's worth looking up your local member store and checking out their produce prices. You can look it up at the National Cooperative Growers Association website.

Almost-Organic CSAs

Another option is to buy your vegetables from a community-supported agriculture (CSA) farm. CSA farms allow members to buy shares for a portion of farm produce. Members share in food production costs in exchange for weekly veggie boxes. Some require volunteer hours and others simply offer work options for lower rates. It is in the CSA community where you can often find organic produce at less-than-organic prices. You do have less say over what you receive, and you do have to pay up front for the entire season, but the lower cost in itself can be a good trade-off, along with the knowledge that you are supporting local sustainable agriculture.

It is in the CSA movement that many farmers sell food that meets standards for organic production though they are not certified organic. Kristina Beuning of Sunbow Farms is one example. Although Beuning does not use synthetic fertilizers or pesticides in crop production and uses growing practices that meet

or exceed USDA standards for organic production, Buening made a decision to no longer obtain certified organic status.

"The whole organic certification process is dictated by a program called the National Organic Program or NOP," Buening explained. "They've created a whole hierarchy of middle men that actually follow you to your farm to check to see if you're following the rules that they've set. And you have to pay these people—they're called Organic Certifying Agents—and they get that status from the NOP and they charge various fees to come out and inspect your farm once a year." Buening pointed out that these agents don't take soil samples to see if you use fertilizers or pesticides, nor do they provide any additional assistance for how to grow better organically. "All it does is create hours and hours of paperwork for me," Buening said. She estimates that the paperwork alone takes 75 hours annually to complete. When buying non-organic seeds, for example, organic farmers must provide documentation proving that they've checked at least three places and can't find that particular variety of organic seeds. In addition to the paperwork, farmers have to pay approximately \$500-700/year to have the Organic Certifying Agents come out and go through their paperwork, in addition to paying a percentage of sales to the Agency (between .05 and 2%). For a small farmer, this is a steep fee, which is why Buening and other CSAs choose to forgo the organic certification process altogether.

In Buening's case, she actually surveyed her customers and asked if they would prefer her to pay for organic certification if she had to pass on the added cost to them—and the answer was invariably no. Many CSAs across the country have done the same thing. Without an organic label, you really have no way of guaranteeing whether a product is organic or not, but for many, having a personal relationship with a farmer that you trust is as good as any certification. If not a CSA, look for a farmer's market and ask the farmer if you can visit their farm (or at least see pictures).

A good starting point is the [Local Harvest](#) website, where you can search for farms, CSAs and farmer's market in your area.

Grow It Yourself

This is the last option, but a good one if you're short on cash with time to spare. Grow vegetables in containers, in your yard or in a local community garden, if you have one. Remember to plant spinach, kale and strawberries for an inexpensive source of food that would otherwise be heavily sprayed if you didn't buy organic.