

## Decoding Organic Labeling

By Susan Camp

A National Public Radio (NPR) report on November 2<sup>nd</sup> about the controversy between practitioners of organic farming and proponents of hydroponic farming piqued my interest and showed me how little I know about either method of commercial fruit and vegetable production. I decided to do a little digging on the internet, and discovered enough material for about 15 articles, just to scratch the surface! This week, I will focus on decoding the complex process of labeling organic food products. Next week I will look at some of the techniques used in organic farming. In the third article in this series, I will examine the seemingly simple practice of hydroponic farming. Both farming methods lend themselves to the home gardening production of fruits and vegetables, but without the requirement for stringent adherence to regulations and the need for certification by an oversight panel.

Organic farming—or gardening—refers to producing fruits and vegetables using techniques that safeguard all aspects of the environment, including recycling and reuse of natural resources; conservation and management of land and wildlife; and avoidance of sewage sludge, synthetic (laboratory-produced) fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. In addition, irradiation of produce and genetic engineering are not permitted. Finally, a USDA accredited certifying agency must give its stamp of approval that all criteria have been met. The food packaging then will receive an organic label.

Several levels of organic labeling exist to ensure that the public receives the most accurate information when purchasing produce. The “100% Organic” label, displayed on the produce packaging, certifies that all ingredients and processing are organic. The name of the certifying agency must be listed on the food’s information panel.

The “Organic” label ensures that the product contains no less than 95% organic material and that any permissible non-organic ingredients constitute no more than 5% of the total, except for salt and water, which are classified as natural ingredients and not included in the combined total. Finally, the certifying agency must be listed on the label.

The “Made with Organic \_\_\_” label certifies that a minimum of 70% organic ingredients must be used. Other agricultural products must have been produced without irradiation, genetic engineering, or sewage sludge. Any non-agricultural ingredients must be included on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances. Again, the name of the certifying agency must appear on the information label.

The final level is “Specific Organic Ingredient” Labeling, which declares that food products containing less than 70% certified ingredients do not have to be certified organic. The USDA and certifying agency seals do not appear on the product label. Certified organic ingredients are listed with their percentages on the information label.

This is great information for us as consumers. I try to buy organic produce at the supermarket whenever possible, even though I know I will pay a few pennies more. Until now, I have looked only for the “Organic” Label. Now that I know about certification levels, I will shop more carefully.

Many of us consider ourselves organic gardeners, but do we always adhere to the strict USDA requirements mentioned earlier for organic farming? Does it really matter if we follow all the rules? Does it make a difference if we decide to sell produce at a local farmers’ market?

Well, yes and no. As a matter of ethics, we should be honest about the production of any items we offer for purchase. Legal exemptions and exclusions exist for growers who sell less than \$5,000 worth of produce annually. Sellers are exempt from organic certification, and cannot display the USDA certification seal, but must use organic growing techniques and maintain records as required by USDA regulations. In addition, non-certified ingredients cannot be used in certified organic products.

See Clemson Cooperative Extension publication HGIC 4085 “Organic Labeling of Multi-Ingredient Food Products” for more detailed information on labeling of organic produce.

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