

What IS Organic?

As you push your grocery cart up and down the aisles, armed with a magnifying glass to read the content labels, you have noticed “organic” designating edibles. You may also have noticed that items so labeled tend to cost more! Currently it may strike us as a new fad, but actually organic, as in organic gardening, has a long history.

The use of the word ‘organic’ is new but the system is old. From the dawn of civilization what was eaten was organic since that was what was there. Until the beginning of the 20th century crops were grown organically although there may have been considerable differences with how they were grown. For example, at Mount Vernon George Washington tried various manures to see how they helped the soil. He was a strong environmentalist without knowing the term because he practiced care of the soil by continuous experimentation, rotating crops, concentrating on native trees and shrubs in open sweeping vistas rather than the constricted formal European garden style.

Washington had an experimental nursery and the beginning of a botanical garden. To keep track of plants he used sticks with coded ‘notches’ that he noted in his diary. Because Mount Vernon had earlier been planted in tobacco, Washington aimed to restore the fertility of the soil trying different methods, testing mud, gypsum, marl, ash, and fish heads. He surely became America’s first farmer, a term he could share with Thomas Jefferson.

Before the 20th century there were no such things as pesticides and fertilizers were known as manures since animal droppings were a handy way to apply nutrients to soil. Techniques had been developed over hundreds of years to suit the soils of various regions. The advent of chemical farming was attractive because of its quick fix to pest control, disease reduction, and the ease of applying fast acting nutrients to the soil.

The first ‘primer’ in organic farming was written by Sir Albert Howard (1873-1947). He was a British agricultural officer assigned to India for over 25 years where he studied the sustainability of the techniques used there in farming. His book was called “An Agricultural Testament” (1947) and in it Howard observed the role of humus and composting in building healthy soil. He left directions for rapid composting, in use today and called the Indore Method.

Curiously, another modern organic gardening proponent was Pulitzer Prize winner Louis Bromfield (1896-1956). He studied at Cornell’s famed Ag School before going to Columbia to study journalism. His book about restoring the worn out soil on his Ohio farm outlined the steps such as planting deep-rooted alfalfa to bring needed nutrients to the surface and the necessity of turning under the alfalfa to re-mineralize the soil. During the decade Bromfield spent in France he learned the importance of the sustainable methods of traditional agriculture used there in contrast to the soil depleting practices used at home.

Many of the sustainable organic farming methods used today have their roots in Bromfield’s 1000 acre farm, ‘Poverty Knob’ that he turned into a farm so productive people came from around the world to study his system. The term ‘organic’ was coined in 1940 by J. J. Rodale (1898-1971) who argued that the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers were destroying the soil and environment.

Although the information as well as the science was available about successful organic farming, the simplicity of the chemical methods claimed adherents despite the negative effects of that method. Eventually Rachel Carson (1907-1964) attracted attention with the publication of “Silent Spring” at a time when other scientific farmers were documenting the damage incurred by reliance on chemical fertilizers.

Efforts continue to make agriculture both ecologically sound and economically profitable which brings us back to the grocery store. Are organically grown fruits, vegetables, meat and milk worth the difference in price? Over time that difference is narrowing and it may disappear. Organic crops not only taste better, but they have higher vitamin levels. The nutrition will not be in those onions and carrots if the soil in which they are grown is nutritionally deprived.

The current emphasis on eating healthily as the best way to avoid debilitating and expensive illness has become the stimulus to the exciting expansion of home gardens. Your neighbors will not be shocked to see tomatoes replacing zinnias in your front yard.

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