

Understanding Organic: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

What does “organic” mean?

The National Organic Standards Board defines organic agriculture as “an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain, and enhance ecological harmony.”

In addition, organic producers are prohibited from using genetically engineered seed or feed, or synthetic fertilizers. Organic livestock must be provided access to the outdoors and living conditions which foster their natural behavior, and are prohibited from receiving growth hormones or antibiotics.

Any product labeled as certified organic must be produced by a farm or business that completes an annual certification process to verify that their practices comply with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP) standards.

What is organic certification?

The USDA accredits certifying agencies, such as the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA), to perform a five-part verification process required for products labeled as certified organic. First, growers and food processors must submit an annual organic system plan describing their practices and inputs. Second, the plan is reviewed and approved by a certification agency. Third, an independent inspector conducts an on-site visit to verify the accuracy of the information submitted by the applicant and prepares a report. Fourth, the entire file and report is reviewed by the certification agency. Finally, if the farm is in compliance, the agency issues a certificate, allowing the products to be marketed as organic.

Who can call themselves “organic”?

Under the NOP, all products labeled as “organic” must go through the certification process. Non-certified products cannot be labeled as organic, even if organic standards have been followed.

The only exception is for producers who sell less than \$5,000 of organic products per year. These producers are still required to comply with organic production and handling standards and specific labeling requirements, but they do not need to apply and pay for certification. They can market their products as “organic” (but not “certified organic”) and may not use the organic seal. Vendors may file a declaration of exemption with an accredited certification agency.



How is the organic label different from others?

Terms such as “pesticide free,” “sustainably grown,” “chemical free,” “naturally-raised,” and “GMO-free” can be used on products, but these claims can sometimes be confusing or misleading, and may not be verified by a third party.

As the gold standard of agricultural and environmental stewardship, certified organic is a federally-regulated labeling program that requires annual oversight and a rigorous certification process. Certified organic farms have received verification by a third party that they are improving the farm’s natural resources; taking a preventative approach to manage weeds, insects, and disease problems; and are only using organically-approved products and materials.

Certified organic products have specific labeling requirements. If the product says “100% Organic,” then the product is made with 100% organic ingredients. If the product says “Organic,” then it was made with at least 95% organic ingredients (with restrictions placed on the remaining 5%). If the product says “Made with Organic [Ingredient(s)],” then it contains a minimum of 70% organic ingredients (with restrictions on the remaining 30%). Products that have less than 70% organic ingredients may list those on the side panel of the package, but may not make any organic claims on the front of the package.

Why does organic food cost more?

Certified organic food can cost more because of increased labor and management costs; higher input costs, like organic feed; and the time and expense of certification. However, organic foods found in season at farmers markets can actually cost less than at the grocery store.

It is also important to consider that conventional food prices do not reflect the hidden costs of industrial production practices, such as polluted runoff or antibiotic resistance. When hidden costs are taken into account, organic foods are seen clearly for the value they are, even if they cost a bit more.



Additional Resources

OEFFA Certification Program: www.oeffa.org, (614) 262-2022

Organic Farming Research Foundation: www.ofrf.org/resources/organicfaqs.html

Organic Trade Association: www.ota.com/organic/faq.html

OSU Extension: www.extension.org/pages/18655/what-is-organic-farming

National Organic Program (NOP): www.ams.usda.gov/nop

National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT/ATTRA): www.attra.ncat.org



About OEFFA

For more than 30 years, OEFFA has used education, advocacy, and grassroots organizing to promote local and organic food systems. OEFFA is a USDA accredited organic certification agency, certifying nearly 700 organic farms and processors throughout the Midwest.

www.oeffa.org