



MOSES ORGANIC FACT SHEET

# Local and Organic Not an Either/or Issue

**A**mericans care about their food, how it is farmed and how far it travels from the farm to their plate. This has spurred the growth of organic and local sales in the marketplace. With increased national awareness and popularity comes attention from national and local press, consumer groups, government and nonprofit agencies. There are both voices of skepticism as well as applause for this consumer concern, and many ask the question: Which one is the better? Local or Organic?

The answer with all its variables can't be straightforward. Ideally, buying local, organic food would be a strong first choice. This encourages environmentally beneficial farming practices in your own backyard while supporting your local farming community. But if that's not an option, how do you choose? The answer does not have to be an either/or choice, and it will depend on the values and priorities used by you, the consumer, when buying your food.

Consumers who consciously seek out foods produced locally and know the production practices of their farmers have the information they need to make the best choices. As consumers you can read food labels, engage in your local community, and know your local farmers. Consumers can encourage farmers to grow organically and encourage supermarkets to buy local organic food. You as the consumer hold all the power. Put your values into the market, speak up, and things will change. You CAN make local, organic food more available. Many will remember that not that long ago neighborhood groceries routinely sold fresh and local sweet corn, tomatoes, melons, eggs and cheeses on their shelves. Purchasing local organic food for resale in the region where it is produced is not that difficult!

## ***As you make your food purchasing decisions consider the following issues:***

### **Good Health – for you, for farm workers, for the environment**

Numerous studies show that organically produced foods have higher nutritional content than foods produced conventionally (visit [www.organiccenter.org](http://www.organiccenter.org) for more info). Organic farmers continually improve the health and vitality of their soils and animals, which ultimately yield nutrient dense foods. Since organic farmers avoid the use of problematic synthetic pesticides, fungicides, and hormones, the likelihood of synthetic residues either in or on organic foods is much less.

Synthetic preservatives, colors, and flavors are specifically prohibited in organic foods, such as nitrates in meat or synthetic waxes on fruit.

Good health for you is one benefit, and good health for farm workers is another. By buying organic, you're ensuring farm workers are not exposed to harmful chemicals. Organic produce also means good environmental health. The chemical fertilizers and pesticides used in conventional farming deplete the biological life in our soil and can contaminate our water supply. With 97% of rural Americans and one half of all Americans nationwide dependent on groundwater for their drinking water, chemical contamination of the water supply is a real concern, with real consequences. Water contamination is not just a local issue, either. The dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico at the base of the Mississippi River is directly related to Midwestern agricultural chemical runoff, resulting in depleted sea life and highly compromised water quality.

### **The Energy Issue**

Why buy an organic tomato grown cross-country, if you can get a conventional one grown locally? Does the petroleum needed to ship the fruit to the consumer outweigh the benefit of the environmental stewardship of the distant organic grower? Or is there no difference? It is true that trucking food cross-country isn't sustainable, (most of the food we eat travels on average 1,500 miles to reach our plate) but an organic tomato hauled hundreds of miles may still trump a locally grown conventional tomato in overall energy impact. The majority of energy needed for food production isn't consumed by transportation needs, but by the production of chemicals, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Together, the production and use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides consumes 40% of the total energy used in farming, making conventional farming a high cost and less environmentally friendly choice. (More info at [www.sustainabletable.org](http://www.sustainabletable.org)). Overall, organic farms use approximately 30% less energy than conventional farms to grow the same amount of food. (Source: [www.rodaleinstitute.org](http://www.rodaleinstitute.org)).

Although much local produce is sold very close to home, some products carrying a local label have actually put on a lot of miles. Distances can add up as a farmer drives from store to store, farm to warehouse or to regional drop off centers. Those local miles, in the back of a pickup truck or as part of a small load, can build energy costs and environmental impact quickly as the transportation methods are not de-

signed to be efficient or economical like long-distance transport is. We like the image of the local farm truck delivery, or even of customers coming out to the farm, but we need to look at actual figures closely before we make assumptions about various local and long distance transportation costs and impacts. (For more on this issue, see [http://www.salon.com/mwt/food/eat\\_drink/2008/06/24/food\\_miles/](http://www.salon.com/mwt/food/eat_drink/2008/06/24/food_miles/))

### **Small Farmers/Local Economies**

The popular phrase “buy local” brings to mind increased diversity and the strengthening of small businesses and local economies. Supporting local farmers, rather than distant organic farms, may appear to be the better choice toward strengthening community and sustainability. But what is the definition of “local?” Every store or farmers market may have their own definition of local, which may include production within 50 miles, or within the state or region, or even just grown in the USA. Is your supermarket locally owned? Is your favorite farmers market vendor local? Is your community supported agriculture farm (CSA) local? All of these local markets keep food dollars in the local economy to some degree.

Buying organic produce from a distance farm doesn't necessarily mean it comes from a mega-farm. Many small independent farmers ship their products cross-country because they have more product than they can sell locally or they have a product that is not available locally outside their region. Buying organic from a distant small farm or cooperative may not keep food dollars in your community, but it can help support the health and diversity of small family farms nationwide.

Widespread distribution of organic foods, now even into mainstream supermarkets, expands the exposure, accessibility, and affordability of organic food to more consumers. As conventional farmers and food companies see the success of organics, they are converting their land to organic as well, lessening the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides while improving biodiversity and the overall ecosystem for us all.

### **Organic Certification is a Guarantee**

There is more to organic than just the avoidance of synthetic chemicals. It is a system that mimics nature and seeks to boost the health of both plants and animals through natural fertilizers and healthy living conditions. Organic certification verifies the land is being treated in a way that continually improves its fertility and the overall environment. Independent third-party certifying agencies verify USDA national standards, ensuring farms follow specific production practices.

By buying organic, you are supporting a system of production that continually improves soil fertility by using the tools that nature provides, rather than petroleum based inputs. Good soil and water stewardship should be supported wherever it occurs. Supporting organic farming locally benefits your own region, however, we all share the same earth and organic production is beneficial to us all, wherever we live.

Local qualifies a general location, but there are no associated quality or production assurances. Does the farmer understand chemical application and disposal rules? There is no oversight of their production, or guidance and review of their production practices. Often the only way you can know a local farmer's production practices is to ask them yourself. Knowing a farmer personally increases the benefits of buying local by several degrees. If you are able to discuss their growing methods with them, you can decide whether a local farmer's foods meet your values and concerns. Do you wish to buy eggs from free ranging chickens, milk from dairy cows that are out grazing on pasture, or tomatoes that were not sprayed with synthetic insecticides or fungicides? Do you want to avoid beef that has been given hormones or systemic parasiticides? Local can mean a direct connection and consumer empowerment with a wealth of information.

Many smaller farmers avoid the tools of industrialized conventional agriculture and may be producing food that meets many of the organic requirements, but these farmers often chose not to become certified. When you know your farmer and what questions to ask, you can be an informed consumer and encourage the type of food production you want to see in your local environment.

### **Local or Organic?**

If you don't know your farmer and their growing methods personally, a certified organic label is the next best thing. It is your guarantee that sustainable and environmentally responsible methods were used to grow that food, providing for healthy and vibrant lands, foods and ecosystem, both now and into the future.

### ***Resources: find a local farm, CSA farm, u-pick farm, or farmers market!***

<http://www.localharvest.org>  
<http://www.savorwisconsin.com>  
<http://www.mda.state.mn.us/food/minnesotagrown/directory.htm>  
<http://www.uni.edu/ceee/foodproject/food.htm>  
<http://organiccenter.org>  
<http://www.mosesorganic.org>

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Visit [www.mosesorganic.org](http://www.mosesorganic.org) for more resources and tools, including our Organic Resource Directory and the Organic Broadcaster Newspaper. Plan to attend our annual Organic Farming Conference in February. To find upcoming events including MOSES trainings and field days visit our web calendar at: [www.mosesorganic.org/events.html](http://www.mosesorganic.org/events.html)