Making Sense of Organic Foods

Take a look down the aisles of your favorite local grocery store. Chances are you have probably noticed an increase in the number of foods labeled as organic. “Production and consumption of organic foods in the United States is increasing” says [insert name here] local Texas AgriLife Extension Service County Agent. In fact, Texas is one of the top States in terms of acreage of certified organic cropland.

Many people are interested in purchasing organic foods for their family [insert name here] comments. But, what does “organic” mean to you as the consumer? According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Organic Program, organic foods are produced by farmers emphasizing the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water. Fresh fruits and vegetables, the top-selling organic category in retail sales, are grown without the use of bioengineering, most conventional pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, or fertilizers made from sewage sludge. Additionally, they are processed without the use of ionizing radiation. Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that have not received any type of antibiotics or growth hormones.

In order for a food to be labeled and marketed as “organic” the producer and/or food processor must first receive certification by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) says [insert name here]. This certification ensures that the product has been produced according to set USDA standards. To assist consumers in the identification of organic foods, USDA developed labeling rules for organic food items. The USDA Organic emblem indicates that a product is at least 95% organic although its use by food producers is voluntary.

Here are some additional tips to help you recognize organically grown foods at the grocery store:

**Single Ingredient Foods:**
- Look for the word “organic” and the USDA Organic seal on single ingredient foods such as meat, milk, eggs, cheese, and fresh fruits and vegetables. The USDA Organic seal may appear as a sticker on fresh produce items. In lieu of a sticker, verbiage may also appear on signs above the produce display.
Multi-ingredient Foods:
- Only foods that are made of at least 95% organic ingredients may display the USDA Organic seal.
- Foods comprised of at least 70% organic ingredients may display organic claims on the front of the food package but may not display the USDA Organic seal. An example of an organic claim would be “Made with organic oats, raisins, and dates”.
- Foods containing less than 70% of ingredients from an organic origin may list specific organically produced ingredients on the side panel of the package.

Some consumers may also be confused by the term “natural” on foods adds [insert name here]. However, the terms “natural” and “organic” are not interchangeable with one another. If a food product indicates “natural” this does not mean that it is an organic product. Only foods labeled “organic” meeting the USDA standards.

[Insert name here] also adds that although many consumers choose to purchase organic foods, USDA makes no claims that organic foods are safer or more nutritious than foods grown or produced by conventional methods.

For more information about organic foods, contact your local Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at [insert information here], or visit the following link:

The National Organic Program
http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexIE.htm