

Organic food

Organic farmers and food producers grow and produce food without using synthetic chemicals (such as pesticides or artificial fertilisers). They do not use genetically modified (GM) components, or expose food to irradiation.

Animal welfare and environmental sustainability are important issues for organic farmers. The term organic can also cover animal produce, such as eggs, which are free range rather than from caged (battery) hens.

Types of organic produce available include fruit and vegetables, dried legumes, grains, meat and meat products, dairy foods, eggs, honey and some processed foods.

Strict certification rules

Organic farms are only certified after they have been operating according to organic principles for three years. However, the use of the word 'organic' is not regulated in Australia, so it's important to make sure that produce you buy comes from certified growers and producers.

Organic farming

Animals raised using organic methods are treated humanely and with respect; for example, chickens are free range and not kept in cages and cows are not kept in feed lots. Animals are also not fed any growth-regulating drugs, steroids, hormones or antibiotics. The animals may be treated with vaccines to prevent disease.

Organic farming is also concerned with protecting the environment and working in harmony with existing ecosystems: for example, conserving water, soil and energy, and using renewable resources and natural farming cycles. Traditional farming methods are often used, such as rotating crops to prevent depleting the soil of nutrients.

Pesticides and other chemicals

Organic foods are not necessarily completely chemical free, but the pesticide residues are considerably lower than those found in foods produced with synthetic chemicals.

Certain naturally occurring pesticides, including pyrethrins, light oils, copper and sulphur, together with biological substances such as *Bacillus thuringiensis* are permitted.

It's a growing industry

The Australian organic food industry is booming; it is currently worth around \$200–\$250 million per year domestically and a further \$50–\$80 million per year in exports with an expected annual growth of up to 60 per cent. Consumer demand is growing at a rate of 20–30 per cent per year, with retail sales increasing 670 per cent between 1990 and 2001–02.

Reasons to buy organic

Some people buy organic produce because they are concerned about pesticides, antibiotics or other chemical residues in food. Although pesticide residues in fruit and vegetables are monitored in Australia, they believe organic food is healthier.

Others appreciate that organic foods promote a healthier and more sustainable use of the environment, and more humane treatment of animals. Also, some people worry about the possible long term health, economic and environmental consequences of GM foods and prefer to support an industry that doesn't use GM techniques.

Pesticides in Australia

The levels of pesticide residue in fruits and vegetables have been monitored in Australia for 30 years. Maximum limits for safe human consumption of pesticide residue include wide safety margins. However, there is always the chance that pesticides currently deemed to be safe may one day be revealed as hazardous to humans or to the environment. This was the case with DDT, which was once a widely used pesticide.

Organic food outlets

You can buy organic food from:

- Some supermarkets
- Some green grocers
- Queen Victoria Market
- Health food shops
- Some fresh food markets
- The Internet
- Certified organic retailers.

Labelling concerns

'Organic-certified produce' means the food was grown, harvested, stored and transported without the use of synthetic chemicals, irradiation or fumigants. While exported organic produce must meet the National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce, there is no nationwide regulation to control the labelling of organic food sold in Australia. Suggestions on making sure the food you are buying is organically grown include:

- If you are buying from an organic retailer, check for the Organic Retailers' and Growers' Association of Australia (ORGAA) notice, which should be prominently displayed.
- Choose foods with the label 'certified organic' from one of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) accredited certifying organisations.
- Check packaging for the grower's name and certification number.
- Don't be fooled by packaging that claims the produce is 'natural' or 'chemical free' if the proper certification labelling is not displayed.

Accredited certifying organisations

The organisations classified by the AQIS as organic certifiers are:

- Biodynamic Research Institute (Demeter)
- Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA)
- National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA)
- Organic Food Chain (OFC)
- Organic Herb Growers of Australia (OHGA)
- Organic Vignerons Association of Australia (OVAA)
- Tasmanian Organic Producers (TOP).

Organic food and nutrition

There have been a number of studies comparing nutritional content of organic and conventionally grown plants and most have shown no significant differences in key vitamin and mineral contents. However, research has shown that, although the differences are small, some organic food has:

- Lower nitrate levels
- Higher vitamin C levels
- Higher levels of selenium.

Organic food can be more expensive

Organic foods is often more expensive because production is more labour intensive and, without herbicides, pesticides and other chemicals, the yield is generally smaller.

Biodynamic food

Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner pioneered biodynamic farming, which places strong emphasis on ecological harmony and environmental sustainability. Biodynamic food is grown with particular composts, preparations and natural activating substances.

Organic food is better for the environment

Excessive use of chemicals and modern farming methods have led to a decline in soil fertility and an increase in salinity and blue-green algae in waterways over many years. Organic farmers try to minimise damage to the environment by using physical weed control and animal and green manure.

Where to get help

- Some supermarkets
- Some greengrocers
- Organic food retailers
- Organic Federation of Australia Tel. (02) 9299 8016

Things to remember

- Organic farming is the production of food without the use of synthetic chemicals or genetically modified components.
- Organic foods are not necessarily completely chemical free, but the pesticide residues will be considerably lower than those found in produce manufactured with synthetic chemicals.
- Choose foods with the label 'certified organic' from one of the seven AQIS accredited certifying organisations.
- Organic farming is better for the environment and more likely to be sustainable.

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