



eat

# Organic Food 101 -- Learn Which Foods You Should Choose

by **Jenn Sturiale**

## Interests

Wellness

Nutrition

Diet

Despite being one of the hottest buzzwords of the moment, "organic" is a term with a bit of an identity crisis. Most of us have at least *some* clue about what it means, but when "organic" stickers seem to be slapped on everything from fruit to foot cream, it can be challenging to figure out what's what.

Let's start with an actual definition: Organic (*adjective*): Relating to food produced with the use of feed or fertilizer of plant or animal origin, [and] without employment of chemically formulated fertilizers, growth stimulants, antibiotics or pesticides.

"Originally, all foods were 'organic' -- grown without synthetic pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertilizers or hormones," says Joshua Rosenthal, founder, director and primary teacher of the **Institute for Integrative Nutrition**. "Large-scale farming has denatured food through massive refining and chemical treatment, and it's taking a toll on both the environment and our bodies."

Typically, folks choose to buy organic foods and products for health reasons, environmental reasons, or both. Rosenthal explains the link between the two: "Pesticides have been shown to cause a variety of illnesses, and **large-scale farming methods** deplete soil of its minerals and nutrients," he says.

By choosing organics, our bodies and the land accumulate less **petrochemical residue** from pesticides and fertilizers. "Organic farming works with the land," says Rosenthal. "Fresh, organic produce contains more vitamins, minerals, enzymes and micronutrients than intensively farmed produce. Plus, it tastes delicious." Organic farming also decreases chemical exposure for farm workers growing the food we eat.

Organic foods are usually more costly than their conventional counterparts, however -- which is a financial obstacle for many. One way I keep my food bill lower is with my inexpensive go-to meal: organic whole grains (brown rice, quinoa, barley, etc.) and organic home-cooked beans (much less expensive than canned, and free of preservatives and added sodium), tossed with seasonal and local organic veggies.

To help you get the most bang for your grocery buck, the **Environmental Working Group** distributes "The Dirty Dozen" and "The Clean Fifteen" -- lists that identify the most- and least-important produce to buy organic. **PBS** reports that non-organic fruits and vegetables on The Dirty Dozen list tested positive for at least 47 different chemicals, with some testing positive for as many as 67. All produce listed on The Clean Fifteen tested for little to no traces of pesticides and are safe to consume in non-organic form.

Here's the basic breakdown.

### **Dirty Dozen 2013 (highest concentrations of pesticide residue):**

Apples, strawberries, grapes, celery, peaches, spinach, sweet bell peppers, imported nectarines, cucumbers and potatoes.

### **Clean Fifteen 2013 (lowest concentrations of pesticide residue):**

Pineapple, papaya, mango, kiwi, cantaloupe, grapefruit, corn, onion, avocado, frozen sweet peas, cabbage, asparagus, eggplant, sweet potatoes and mushrooms.

Can't commit all that to memory? Download the **EWG app** to keep this info at your fingertips when you're cruising the supermarket aisles.

Here are a few more ways to get started on going organic:

## Good: Switch To Organic Brands

Replace some of your regular grocery items with their organic equivalents. In her **New York Times Well** blog, Tara Parker-Pope recommends upping the percentage of organic food in your diet without making drastic changes to your shopping cart *or* your spending. Organic milks, cheeses and yogurts are easy to find, as are organic cereals, breads and meats. Remember that small steps impact the big picture: Each organic choice you make means you are ingesting fewer chemicals -- and that's the whole point.

## Better: Buy Food From The Farm

**Community-Supported Agriculture** (CSA) has gotten *really* popular, providing a direct link between farmers and consumers. In the CSA system, a farmer sells his produce by offering customers shares -- a ration of seasonal produce or other farm products they'll receive on an agreed schedule (usually weekly or biweekly) throughout the farming season. Shares are usually bought before the growing season begins, giving the farmer the cash he needs to buy seeds, repair equipment and hire help. When the share begins, customers get to eat farm-fresh produce throughout the season *and* get to know the folks responsible for growing it -- a win-win. **Local Harvest** lists CSAs in your area.

## Best: Plant Your Own

Like the idea of gardening but feel daunted by the thought of getting down into the dirt? If taken in small steps, planting an edible garden is an achievable goal with great rewards. How cool would it be to know *you* made the food you're eating?

Check out the **Mother Nature Network** for a list of easy-to-grow veggies. No backyard? No problem! With a little know-how, you urban dwellers can get your grow on by mastering the art of **small-space gardening**.

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