



# buying organic

**SHOPPING** for groceries today means confronting new choices among goods that appear to be identical in their prices and have the addition of “organic” on their labels. What does organic truly mean? It means that a product is grown without synthetic fertilizers, chemical pesticides, growth hormones, or antibiotics. Beyond that, we are left with questions such as:

- What exactly does it mean when food is labeled “organic”?
- Why couldn’t we find “organic” labels 20 years ago?
- How do we know the products we buy are organic?

Here’s the short course. In 1990, Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA). Twelve years later, beginning on October 21, 2002, organic food became eligible for official USDA recognition. The “organic” labels and products you find in stores today are the result of this law. When you buy an organic product you are paying for an assurance that the product is better than its conventional counterpart.

The first thing to remember is that any product sold in the United States that claims to be organic must meet the criteria of the USDA’s National Organic Program. Although the USDA seal is not required, every organic product must include the name and address of a certifying agency accredited by the USDA. In other words, if it says “organic” it has to meet the government standards, and it will most likely display the USDA organic seal.

But not all organic foods are created equal. Depending upon the percentage of organic ingredients a product contains, it falls into one of four categories – only two of which are eligible for the recognition on the front of a label.

## LABELS

### 100% Organic

Every ingredient in the product must be grown organically; except for the salt and water (water must conform to safe drinking standards).

None of the ingredients can be irradiated, contain GMO organisms, or be grown with sewage sludge fertilizer (the “big three”).

### Organic

95% of its ingredients must be organic and must not be affected by the “big three.”

### Made with Organic Ingredients

The product is not allowed to use the word *organic* as a description of the product, and isn’t eligible for a USDA seal, but the product may include “made with organic ingredients” on the front of the label. This rating requires that at least 70% of the ingredients be grown, shipped, and packaged according to organic standards.

**No listing of organic on the front label, only listed on the back of the label.**

The product bears no seal or certifier's logo and contains less than 70% organic ingredients. Organic ingredients can be listed on the front panel. The "big three" are allowed in the non-organic ingredients.

### **Certified Organic**

The product has been produced according to the National Organic Program's rule and certified to be in compliance with the rule by an independent, USDA-accredited Certifier.

### **Wildcrafting**

The practice of harvesting plants from their **natural**, or **wild** habitat for food, medicinal, or other purposes. It applies to uncultivated plants wherever they may be found, and is not necessarily limited to wilderness areas. Ethical considerations are often involved, such as protecting endangered species. When wildcrafting is done sustainably with proper respect, generally only the branches or flowers from plants are taken and the living plant is left, or if it is necessary to take the whole plant, seeds of the plant are placed in the empty hole from which the plant was taken. Care is taken to only remove a few plants, flowers, or branches, so plenty remains to continue the supply.

### **Free Range**

Usually applied to poultry, this term means any livestock raised with unlimited access to the outdoors.

### **Grass-fed**

Grass-fed animals (usually cattle or milk cows) are those that eat only what they were designed to eat: grasses. Organic regulations do not require grass feeding exclusively.

## **ORGANIC AND CONVENTIONAL: A COMPARISON**

### **Conventional Farmers**

Apply chemical fertilizers to promote plant growth.  
Spray insecticides to reduce pests and disease.  
Use chemical herbicides to manage weeds.  
Give animals antibiotics, growth hormones, and medications to prevent disease and spur growth.

### **Organic Farmers**

Apply natural fertilizers, such as manure or compost, to feed soil and plants.  
Use beneficial insects and birds, mating disruption or traps to reduce pests and disease.  
Rotate crops, hand weed or mulch to manage weeds.  
Give animals organic feed and allow them access to the outdoors.  
Use preventive measures – such as rotational grazing, a balanced diet and clean housing – to help minimize disease.

Sources: *USDA and [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)*

