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# ORGANIC BROADCASTER

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Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Service

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*"To be interested in food but not in food production is clearly absurd."*

~ Wendell Berry

## Accountability, environment, health among top reasons for choosing organic foods

By Melinda Hemmelgarn, M.S., R.D.

As a Registered Dietitian, I'm frequently asked about the value of the organic label. Are organic foods really worth the higher price at the checkout? Are they more nutritious? What about safety? I advise consumers to make a wise investment in organic food, and here's why:

### Trust

I want to believe the farmers at my local market who say their produce is "chemical free" or grown without pesticides. But I've been lied to. The truth is, few people enjoy interrogating farmers about their farming practices. By being certified, farmers make it easy for the consumer to purchase food with a legal set of standards, including: no genetically engineered seeds or genetically modified organisms (GMOs); no synthetic fertilizers; no sewage sludge; no irradiation; no growth hormones and no antibiotics. Most synthetic pesticides are prohibited, and only a limited number of pesticides are approved for use in organic systems.

You can learn more about organic farming practices at [mosesorganic.org/whyorganic/methods](http://mosesorganic.org/whyorganic/methods).

### Accountability

Our food dollars are votes for the kind of food system we want to see flourish. By purchasing organic food, we support those farmers who go through the rigors of organic certification. When farmers become certified they send a message to our government leaders who must take



*Buttermilk Falls CSA, Osceola, Wis.*

note of the growing numbers backed by consumer demand. If farmers aren't certified, they're not counted.

### Safety

The topic of "food safety" often focuses on cooking and storage temperatures, or preparation methods. While it's true that harmful bacteria in improperly handled food can lead to serious foodborne illness, so can pesticide drift and residues. Because pesticide residues are rarely present on organic food, it makes sense to protect our family's health with the organic choice. Organic farming methods also benefit farm workers and their family members because they're not exposed to toxic chemicals in the field.

### Pollinator Protection

Because organic farming systems promote biodiversity, and don't rely

on the routine use of pesticides, choosing organic food helps protect pollinators, such as bees and other insects that are critical to food production and agricultural resilience.

### Antibiotic Preservation

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, antibiotic resistance ranks among the top global public health concerns. Resistance is due in large part to unnecessary use of these drugs in livestock to improve feed efficiency. Organic farmers help preserve and protect the effectiveness of our precious antibiotics because these drugs aren't allowed in organic farming systems. Increasing numbers of consumers are rightfully looking for antibiotic-free meat and dairy products. The organic label gives us that guarantee.

## Nutrition

A growing body of evidence shows that foods produced using organic methods provide higher levels of beneficial nutrients—such as: antioxidants in produce and omega-3 fatty acids in meat and dairy—and less harmful contaminants, including pesticide residues and cadmium.

## Climate

The food at the end of our forks has a tremendous impact on global climate change. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recommends organic farming practices because they help sequester carbon, use less fossil fuel, and can help mitigate global warming.

## Soil Health

The microbes in healthy soil are intimately connected and related to the microbes in the human gut, where the bulk of our “microbiome” resides. By protecting and supporting the biodiversity of organisms in the soil, organic farmers help protect the health of our entire ecosystem, including the organisms that live in our gut. Microbial communities connect agriculture, nutrition, medicine and life on our planet.

## Water Quality

The Minneapolis *Star Tribune*'s report titled: “In Farm Country, tainted water is just the way it is,” raised red flags about toxic agricultural practices. Water is our most essential nutrient, and contaminated water supplies harm public health and destroy the quality of our lives.

Organic farming methods help protect our shared watersheds and all who live downstream.

## Our Future

When Robert Shimek, Executive Director of the White Earth Land Recovery Project in northern Minnesota, took the stage at Beyond Pesticide's annual Forum in Minneapolis last spring, he reminded us to ask “how are the children?” when assessing the success or failure of society.

Today's children are increasingly facing illnesses that have a connection to our food and farming systems. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics reports an increasing rate of children born with neuro-developmental disabilities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that about one in six, or about 15%, of U.S. children aged 3 through 17 years have a one or more developmental disabilities, and Sesame Street's new character with autism confirms that we are witnessing a “new normal.”

Children's cancer rates are on the rise, too, as well as allergies, and birth defects—all of which may be due in part, to exposure to environmental toxins related to agricultural chemicals.

Shimek explained that children living on the White Earth Reservation are regularly exposed to drift from pesticides sprayed on potatoes grown for McDonald's restaurants by the R.D. Offutt company. Potatoes grown in his region are sprayed every five to seven days with the fungicide chlorothalonil. The impact? Children in the region suffer higher rates of autism, and 18-21 percent qualify for special education

programs, compared to the Minnesota state average of 13 percent.

Dr. Phil Landrigan, dean of global health at Mt. Sinai Medical School, reports that, “Until this year, most herbicides in the Midwest were sprayed during a six-week window, but now the heavy herbicide spray season will last at least four months, placing more women and children at heightened risk.”

Mothers should not have to worry about toxins passed along to their infants during pregnancy, through breastmilk, or in community parks, schools, or their family's food and water.

In Starbuck, Minn., registered dietitian and organic farmer Mary Jo Forbord fears neighboring sprays on non-organic commodity crops will harm her family's health, livestock, and fruit orchard, named after her deceased son, Joraan. Her farm produces nourishing foods recommended by dietitians to reduce the risk of chronic disease. Last year she created a short film about her farm, food philosophy and life, including her husband's exposure to chemical fertilizer drift and resulting illness, confirming the imperative to produce food sustainably—without poison.

Growing numbers of spray drift incidents threaten organic farmers' livelihoods, health, and consumers' access to quality food. Yet in a recent *New York Times* article, Monsanto estimated that by 2025, it will have corn seed able to withstand five different pesticide sprays. However, make note: none are adequately tested individually for safety, let alone in combination.

It is imperative that we look to our food and farming systems as keys to restoring planetary and public health.

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*Listen to Food Sleuth Radio Thursday evenings at 5 p.m. at [kopn.org](http://kopn.org).*



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