



PRODUCE

Farmers' Market Vendors: **Labeling Your Produce at Market**

There's a growing interest in shopping for fresh food at farmers' markets. As consumers question how the food they buy was grown, farmers respond by labeling their fare as *organic*, *natural*, *sustainable*, *local*, *responsibly grown*, or other catchy terms. However, only *organic* has specific standards farmers must follow, and a law that defines who can use the label.

To be able to label your produce as organic, you must be certified by a USDA-accredited certifier or qualify as exempt—that means you sell less than \$5,000 annually to consumers and meet all of the other requirements of the organic regulation, including maintaining detailed documentation of your farm activities, input use and sales.

The organic label is an excellent marketing tool, and offers many benefits to you as a farmer. The specialists at MOSES can answer your questions about organic certification and growing practices. (*See contact information below.*)

Without rigorous standards behind them, the other labels can mean something different to each person who uses them. This fact sheet will help you understand how *organic* compares to the other labels at your markets.

NO SPRAY

Organic farmers spray their crops, the difference is what they spray. Approved sprays in organic include kelp or fish emulsion foliar feeds, botanically based pesticides or minerals such as fine clay powders. However, even these materials may or may not be allowed, depending if all of the active and secondary ingredients are approved under the organic law.

Some farmers have *no spray* on their signage, and after some questioning, admit they use dusts to control insects. While they did not spray, they are misleading their customers who are assuming they do not use organically prohibited materials.

Certified organic operations have the benefit of organic certification agencies who can review and communicate which products are allowed for use. Certifiers can obtain proprietary information on all ingredients present in various farm input products, many of which are not required to appear on the product label. There could be

dust suppressants, flowing agents, and potentially toxic synergists that increase the mode of action of the active ingredients in the product. Many pesticides available to home gardeners in retail settings are not approved for use in any type of commercial operation (organic or non-organic) where the final produce will be sold to others. Organic certification agencies make it easier for the farmer to know what's allowed and what isn't.

NO CHEMICALS

The use of the phrase "no chemicals" is also misleading. There are "synthetic" or chemical substances allowed in organic agriculture, which have gone through a strict review to determine there's no negative effects on the environment or human health in the manufacture, use or disposal of the substance. When a synthetic substance is allowed, there are no natural alternatives to this "chemical" to solve the problem.

For a farmer to claim "no chemicals" on the produce, they can't have used treated seeds, rooting hormones, annual transplants in commercially available potting mix, or any kind of insect sprays or chemical fertilizers. Again, this phrase is used to assure consumers that they are buying a product that is similar, if not just the same as organic, but typically it is not.

FERTILITY INPUTS AND POTTING MIXES

The word "organic" on potting mixes, bagged manures, peat moss, etc., can be used as long as the product contains carbon. Many of these "organic" inputs highlight the word organic on their labels, since it attracts consumers who believe it to be similar to organic food, containing little to no toxic synthetic materials. Unfortunately, many of these products have been treated with synthetic fumigants, insecticides, or herbicides. Blended products could contain synthetic wetting agents or synthetic fertilizers, which are not allowed in organic agriculture.

A farmer can try to obtain product information by contacting the manufacturer, but manufacturers are not required to disclose this information.

An organic certification agency, since it is an arm of the

USDA, has a much easier time obtaining this information and provides an invaluable service, helping certified organic growers use products acceptable in organic production.

MORE THAN USING APPROVED MATERIALS

Organic certification mandates a specific hierarchy when using pesticides of any kind. First, the organic farmer must seek out a systems-based approach to dealing with the issue. Crop rotation or use of trap crops (cultural methods), use of floating row covers or fences for mammalian pests (physical methods), or mechanical weed or pest control (bug vacuums for instance) are the first line of crop protection.

Secondly, they can use natural botanicals or minerals, such as fine clay particles sprayed on leaves to irritate the mouth parts and discourage feeding insects, or the use of yeasts or beneficial fungi to manage bacterial and fungal diseases. Lastly, they can use the synthetics or “chemicals” that have been approved, provided that they have documented the first two approaches in this list have been shown to be ineffective.

Organic is a systems-based approach to agriculture, with the organic certification process an integral part of the continual improvement of the farm system. The healthier and more diverse the ecosystem and farm production system, the more robust crop health and yields become over time.

Without the annual oversight of organic certification agencies, it is difficult to guarantee that farmers are following this regime, and that their management system is equivalent to organic.

There are also a wide variety of requirements, such as the mandate that all annual transplants be certified organic, or that organic seeds be planted if they are available in the variety, quality or quantity needed by the grower. Non-approved seed treatments are never allowed, even if the desired seed is not available untreated. This is just an example of some of the many fine points that farmers may not know or understand unless they are certified organic.

BEYOND ORGANIC, ALMOST ORGANIC

Unless a farmer is certified organic or sells less than \$5,000 annually, he or she cannot use the word organic in any way to represent their product. This includes telling shoppers that they farm “better than organic.”

There is a misconception that since some synthetics are allowed in organic agriculture, *all* organic farmers use them. That isn't the case. Since organic farmers are mandated to first use systems for crop protection, and approved synthetics only as a last resort, most organic farmers use few, if any, of the allowed synthetics.

Without the oversight of organic certification, there is no guarantee to the consumer that the “beyond organic” farmer's systems or inputs meet any standards. When a non-certified organic farmer misrepresents their production either as organic or as better than organic, they are damaging the organic label for those farmers who go through the rigorous process of organic certification and who achieve the use the highly respected organic label in the marketplace.

NATURAL, SUSTAINABLE, LOCAL, RESPONSIBLE

None of these labels has a legal definition or an agreed-upon meaning. This puts the responsibility on the shopper to question farmers about their growing methods. When shoppers come to a stall that sells certified organic produce, they know what's behind that label.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

MOSES has fact sheets and information about the requirements and benefits of certified organic agriculture and how farmers can develop organic systems on their farms and gain organic certification.

Get help growing organic:
mosesorganic.org



MOSES provides education, resources, and guidance to help farmers grow organic.

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