

What is organic agriculture?

Why is it important?

Nearly everyone has some idea of what organic agriculture is. There are lots of ideas out there. At least some of them are wrong.

I've also found recently that it's not a topic that is brought up easily in the "conventional" agriculture world.

There is still a lot of prejudice against organic, some of it encouraged by the folks who sell pesticides and fertilizers, and by those whose research depends on synthetic products.

As a strategy for growing food and managing Earth, **organic principles and practices are very important, maybe even critical, to our survival.**

Starting with the biggest picture, **the Principles of Organic Agriculture are Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care.** These come from the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, or IFOAM, which represents grass roots organic organizations from all over the planet. NOFA is a member of IFOAM.

It is worth pointing out that the rise in chronic diseases, increasing ecological disasters, raging inequality and growing lack of care for each other and Earth are worrisome trends in our society. The industrial food and agriculture system plays at least a part in all of them. Are CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations) and heavily sprayed monocultures of genetically engineered plants a good model of care?

What does our government, and especially the USDA say about organic?

In 2002, the Federal Government took control of the word "Organic" when it is used to identify an agricultural product that is sold. It applies mostly to food, but flowers, fibers, trees and shrubs can also be grown organically. To be sold as organic, they must be certified by a USDA accredited agency (for example, baystateorganic.org) or be from a farm that sells less than \$5,000 worth of organic products a year.

The USDA says that

"Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony.

The primary goal of organic agriculture is to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals and people."

(National Organic Standards Board, 1997)

That may be one of the best goals articulated by the government. Health and ecology are critically important.

Organic is holistic in its thinking.

We ask where things come from, where they go and what the effects are at both ends.

If the production of food consumes lots of fossil fuel energy, destroys topsoil and communities, and encourages concentrated corporate control, its net return may be negative.

Indeed, earlier this year, it was found that there is at least \$2.00 worth of environmental damage from food production for every dollar of profit in the food system. Based on those figures, it looks like there is also \$1.50 of health care costs for every dollar in profit in the food system, just for three of the major diseases related to what we eat. So the very profitable industrial food system makes \$1 profit while we pay \$3.50 in costs for just some of its damage. We also pay for the food and the industry's profits.

Organic methods address the three largest environmental problems on Earth: climate change, excess nitrogen flow and biodiversity loss.

By not using chemical nitrogen, organic farmers, gardeners and land care professionals avoid adding to the excess nitrogen problem. Excess nitrogen pollutes salt water, encourages weeds and weedy growth, insect feeding and diseases. Making chemical nitrogen consumes fossil fuel and applying chemical nitrogen releases powerful greenhouse gases from the soil.

Add in limiting inputs and local production, rather than shipping food (especially fresh fruits and vegetables which are mostly water) an average of 1500 miles, and there are more energy savings from organic methods to help limit climate change.

As the USDA says, building biodiversity is at the heart of organic.

Fairness

You can grow all the food in the world, but if people don't have access or money to purchase that food, it does no good. The organic movement is blooming in community gardens, urban farms, CSAs for low income families and produce donation programs to begin to address the unfairness in a system which offers very low pay to food workers and provides lots of junk and fast food to those in poorer communities.

NOFA is one of four founders of the Agricultural Justice Project that works to bring fairness to workers in the food system.

So maybe instead of "organic" agriculture we should talk about "healthy, ecological, care-full and fair agriculture that directly addresses Earth's three most serious environmental problems."

Organic is easier to say.

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