

Premium market

Organic produce market grows, but debate continues. Is it worth the price?

By Kerry Neville, Special to the Tribune
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A few years ago, buying organic meant a special trip to stores such as Whole Foods Market or hunting down the lone organic grower at the farmers market. Now, nearly every traditional grocer is expanding its organic produce selections.

Not surprisingly, health-conscious Baby Boomers--particularly those aged 45 to 54--are fueling the buying trend, according to the Organic Trade Association.

Although the organic contribution of total produce sales is small, at just 5.5 percent, produce grabs the biggest market share (41 percent) of all organic foods sold. Sales topped \$5 billion in 2005.

A recent study from the Food Marketing Institute, a trade association for the retail food industry, reported that consumers buy organic because they believe foods are more nutritious and free of pesticides.

But is organic produce more healthful? It depends on who you talk to. Organic produce contains fewer pesticides than conventionally grown fruits and vegetables but some experts question whether it makes a difference in terms of healthfulness.

Ron Gardner, senior extension associate at Cornell University, doesn't think so. "Farmers are not out there using pesticides just because they're available--they use them wisely and when necessary," he said.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) closely monitors pesticides and health risk, Gardner said, and there is

no evidence to suggest that the minute amount of pesticide residues in fruits and vegetables are causing any health-related problems.

That's true, said Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation--"but not having evidence also is not proof that pesticide residues are safe. We just don't know."

The Environmental Working Group (EWG), a non-profit research organization based in Washington, D.C., reported that the combined effects of even low-level pesticide exposures from multiple sources is worrisome and has not been fully studied.

Analyzing 1992-2001 government data of tests for pesticides on the most popular produce, EWG listed the 12 most contaminated fruits and vegetables: apples, bell peppers, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, potatoes, red raspberries, spinach and strawberries.

The group claims that eating these conventionally grown fruits and vegetables will expose a person to nearly 20 pesticides per day, on average. It added that consumers can significantly lower pesticide exposure by buying organic when purchasing these particular produce items.

Gardner said that attention should be focused on eating enough fruits and vegetables, not whether they are conventionally or organically grown.

"Americans fall drastically short of meeting the recommended five or

more daily servings of fruits and vegetables," Gardner said, "and research has shown that can have a detrimental impact on health. The same cannot be said for the minute risk posed by pesticides used in crops."

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What does organic mean?

Foods labeled "organic" and those that use the USDA Organic Seal must abide by a strict set of rules. In crop production, organic standards for farmers as set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture ban the use of most pesticides and fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients. The land used to grow the crops must be free of prohibited chemicals for at least three years before harvest of an organic crop. And before a product can be labeled organic, a government-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to make sure the farmer is abiding by standards.

Organically farmed crops rely heavily on labor-intensive techniques to manage pests, according to Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation.

Cover crops, mulching, the use of beneficial insects, birds and soil organisms are ways that organic farmers keep pests to a minimum. Additionally, a limited number of pesticides are allowed for use in organic crops; they contain botanical or primarily non-synthetic ingredients that are broken down by sunlight and oxygen. -- K.N.