

Organic, conventional farmers share one goal

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By Craig Underwood

The market for organically grown produce is clearly growing. So is the market for vitamins, supplements for athletes, and various herbal supplements and medicines. In every case, we are paying a fair amount of money with the hope that we will be healthier, perform better and live longer.

One of my fellow competitors ate blue-green algae from Oregon, expecting it to make him row faster. A local Japanese company harvests barley to be made into pills and drinks for its health benefits. Most of us are not buying these products because scientific studies indicate that all those good things will happen. It is our belief system. It is the belief of many people that eating organic is healthier and better for our environment. Often, there is a strong feeling that organic is good and conventional is bad.

There are positives and negatives to both styles of farming. The organic movement has demonstrated that there are other approaches to managing nutrients, pests and soil health than those that were common many years ago. There has been a major shift in conventional farming practices away from the toxic and persistent materials that were used before Rachel Carson pointed out what was happening to the environment in "Silent Spring," written more than 40 years ago now. The Environmental Protection Agency has eliminated chemicals implicated in the initiation of cancer, and new materials being developed are pest-specific, quickly broken down when exposed to air and light, and often biologically developed from naturally occurring materials. Some interfere in the normal

reproductive process. We have learned to watch for natural enemies and even rear them when they can be effective. Many conventional farmers have taken a balanced approach to soil fertility, using both organic materials, such as compost, mulch and green manure, with the commercially produced form of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium.

There are still some toxic materials that demand strict regulation and care for worker safety. The industry actively searches for alternatives to those. An analogy can be drawn to human medicine. As long as the system is healthy, there should be no need for the pharmacy. But if we are hit with a staph infection, it's good to have an effective antibiotic to deal with it.

Organic farming is less efficient in many ways. It often costs double the cost per acre to produce, depending on the crop. Blueberries are a perfect example where organically grown are double the cost per acre. Yet, it is a crop that requires little more than a copper spray during the nonfruiting season and uses a lot of mulch and organic matter. Is there value in paying double for the fruit? Organic fertilizers, such as manures and mulch, require a lot of fuel to transport. It is hard to believe there is enough fish, blood meal and kelp extract to grow all of our produce organically. Depending on green manure crops is not an efficient use of land in Ventura County. Much of the increased cost is because of the labor required for weeding. This is at a time when many want to restrict the flow of farm workers across the border.

One of the replacements for conventional fertilizers for organic growers is sodium nitrate, naturally occurring but not beneficial to the soil over the long run.

Part of the material reporting of pesticide use by county and state agencies includes organic chemicals. Organic growers also spray, but the materials must be natural. Many of the materials used in organic growing are also used conventionally but often improved to be more effective.

As our knowledge increases, we learn more about how to achieve maximum production while not harming our soil and water. This is a problem for organic and conventional growers alike. Farmers recognize that overuse of nitrogen causes harm to our waters, and phosphates and potash can degrade rivers and lakes. The goal for farmers and consumers alike should be to work toward a sustainable food supply that uses the least energy and land per unit of food produced. That may combine the best of both systems and require compromises by both. Both systems rely heavily on fossil fuels for the cultivation of crops. It would not be practical to return to the use of horses.

Whether one chooses to buy organic, conventional, or something in between, one thing is sure and that is that our fresh fruits and vegetables are safe, nutritious and the backbone of a healthy diet.

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