

Are “Local” and “Organic” Two Identical Peas in a Pod?

By Joanie Quinn, New Mexico Department of Agriculture Organic Program

“Would you rather have local or organic?” That’s a question I hope to never hear again. The two labels address entirely different issues, and I don’t want to choose. I want *both*, and this is why.

The Choice

Choosing “local” addresses questions of freshness and reducing the number of miles food is transported to reach our plates (and the energy that is consumed in that transport). Choosing local, as a rule, means that money you paid for your food will stay in your community. Choosing local often means that the farmer gets a bigger chunk of the purchase price. Choosing local can help keep farmland active in our state and in our communities. These are all good things and I want to support them. Choosing local does *not* address other issues I care about: the farming practices used to produce the product, the inputs that were applied, or the steps taken to conserve water and build soil.

Choosing “organic” addresses questions concerning how produce, meat, milk or fiber was raised or grown. “Organic” is shorthand for a *method* of farming that relies on nature’s processes to produce food and fiber while enhancing biological diversity and protecting our natural resources.

Choosing organic means that no antibiotics were used in livestock; no genetically modified seeds or plants were used to produce crops or feed animals; synthetic pesticides and fertilizers have been replaced with natural substances such as powdered rock, compost, green manure and cover crops; and insects are managed by rotating crops, creating habitat for beneficial species, and increasing biodiversity. Organic production means that soil and water must be conserved and water cannot be polluted with agricultural runoff. Organic production aims to minimize off-farm inputs.

The Label

What is the definition of “local?” Who decides? How do you know?

There is no accepted definition of “local.” As a result the label “local” is regularly used and abused. Caveat emptor on this one, but most farmers’ markets in the state do a good job of ensuring that product sold there is grown or raised in New Mexico. Talk to your local farmer!

The label “organic” by law requires adherence to federal standards for organic production and annual inspection, as well as certification by an accredited third party auditor to verify compliance with the standards. Some growers choose not to pursue organic certification because they feel the program is another example of onerous federal regulation of farming. It is good to remember that it was farmers and consumers in the 1990’s who demanded that the federal government control the use of the label “organic” to protect consumers from unscrupulous claims. Organic certification is definitely an additional burden. Farmers who choose to assume it should be celebrated.

Some produce and meat sold at farmers' markets is organic and some is not. If you want to purchase *organic* products at the market, look for the USDA or NMDA organic seal or ask to see the farmer's organic certificate. Most of us end up supplementing farmers' market purchases with trips to a grocery store. Look for the words "organic," or "certified organic" on labels and signs at local grocers to make sure you are getting organic products.

And what about "natural?" The word "natural" doesn't tell you much. "Natural meat" for example, only means that the product is "minimally processed" and has no artificial ingredients or added color. The term natural says nothing about how the animals were raised or what they were fed.

The Guarantee

Do the labels "local" or "organic" or "natural" guarantee absence of synthetic chemicals in our food? No. Even the snow in Antarctica contains pesticide residue. *Organic* production minimizes the residue found on and in our food and insures that further residue is not added to the planetary burden. Local/natural food may or may not play a similar role depending on the practices employed by the farmer.

Buying food involves lots of choices. There are personal questions: is it fresh, is it something you like to eat, is it something you know how to prepare (I had an epic struggle with cardoon long ago), is it affordable, is it healthy for you? For many of us there are also broader environmental and social questions: was this crop grown in a way that caused erosion of the soil, was a lot of fuel used to transport the crop to market, does production of that crop help support our local economy, did runoff from fertilizers pollute our water, were the animals treated humanely? Each of us will make slightly different choices depending on our needs and values. Make mine organic *and* local!