

SUSTAINABILITY LIVING GUIDE: 34. A MONTH WITHOUT MONSANTO¹

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In January of this year, while procrastinating on Facebook, I followed a link to an article reporting on evidence that there may be health effects associated with consuming [Monsanto's](#) genetically modified (GM) corn. Clicking on that link was one of those moments on which I look back and laugh. I had no idea how my life was about to change.

Monsanto's Reach

The article I stumbled onto concerned a study done in 2009 by a group of French scientists investigating the safety of genetically modified food. Their results, as published in the *International Journal of Biological Sciences*,² pointed toward kidney and liver damage in rats fed GM corn. I began to research where exactly Monsanto corn appeared in my family's diet. With a little online sleuthing, I learned that in addition to producing the genetically modified corn, Monsanto produces several other genetically modified crops such as soy, sugar beets, and cotton. Many of these crops form the foundation of our diets: 70 to 80 percent of American processed foods contain genetically engineered ingredients, according to the Grocery Manufacturers of America. A large percentage of the cotton in our clothes and homes begins in Monsanto's labs. By day two of my attempt to remove Monsanto from my life, I realized I was in way over my head.

Probing a little deeper, I was surprised to learn that a company specializing in genetically modified plant crops also had an enormous influence on America's meat industry. Sixty percent of genetically modified corn feeds America's beef cattle. Additionally, Monsanto's recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) is used to increase milk production in many dairy cows.

Tracing Foods Back to Their Source

I decided to see if I could go the entire month of March without consuming any Monsanto products. I committed to an all organic, vegan diet, and reluctantly invested in a small organic cotton wardrobe. It was an experiment born of curiosity: I wanted to know just how deeply my life was influenced by Monsanto, a company I knew little about before that click of my mouse in January.

For the past 10 years Monsanto has bought up seed companies around the globe. They now own a majority of the seed lines in America, including a large percentage of organic seeds. For everyday purposes, a Monsanto seed that is grown organically is still organic, but in my attempt to avoid Monsanto, I was left without any easy way of knowing what foods fit my experiment. I retreated to subsisting on wild-caught fish while I dug deep to try to figure out where exactly my foods came from. With the help of sustainable food advocate Cassie Gruenstein,³ I got in touch with dozens of health food stores and manufacturers to ask where they sourced their products. I spent hours at the farmers' market asking farmers what seed companies they bought from,

¹ Yes! Magazine, August 24, 2010

² de Vendômois JS, Roullier F, Cellier D, Séralini GE. A Comparison of the Effects of Three GM Corn Varieties on Mammalian Health. *Int J Biol Sci* 2009; 5:706-726. Available from <http://www.biolsci.org/v05p0706.htm>

³ <http://cassiegruensteinconsulting.trouble.com/>

googling on my iPhone before making purchases. It took several weeks, but I slowly built a somewhat normal Monsanto-free existence. There is no easy way to avoid Monsanto. It requires talking with the person who grew your food—every ingredient of every bite. Unfortunately, with the exception of a few national brands (check out Annie’s, Inc. Massa Organics, and Lundberg Farms for a good start), there is no easy way to avoid Monsanto. It requires talking with the person who grew your food—every ingredient of every bite.

Good First Steps⁴

While it’s extremely difficult to entirely avoid Monsanto, there are some basic guidelines that anyone can use to minimize the genetically modified organisms in their lives.

- (1) Avoid processed foods. In particular, eliminate High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) from your diet and be sure to read labels. HFCS appears in everything from sodas to wheat bread.
- (2) Consider going vegetarian, limiting your meat consumption, or buying grass-fed varieties. Over 60 percent of genetically modified corn goes to feed cattle on polluting concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) in America.
- (3) Buy organic dairy products to make sure animals weren't given Monsanto’s recombinant bovine growth hormone.
- (4) Buy organic cotton when you can. Monsanto is a major player in the cotton industry. Even though cotton makes up only 2.5 percent of the world’s crops, it is doused with 16 percent of the world’s pesticides. Cotton pesticides, most of which are listed as “extremely hazardous” by the World Health Organization, turn up regularly in water sources around the globe.

What most amazed me during my month without Monsanto was the influence that one corporation had in my daily life—without me knowing anything about it. Once I started looking, Monsanto was everywhere. Once I started making the effort to avoid it, I found something else that surprised me: the confidence that comes from really knowing what I’m eating.

⁴ For a comprehensive list of non-Monsanto seed companies check out:
<http://www.garden-of-eatin.com/how-to-avoid-monsanto/>