

TEN ORGANIC FARMING TRENDS THAT CAN MAKE YOUR LIFE BETTER¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

Despite a stagnant economy, consumers are saying "Yes!" to organic more than ever. In fact, a recent Organic Trade Association report found that compared to last year, 41 percent more people are opting for organic rather than chemical food, even in this cash-strapped economy. But why? Part of the reason is that the health issues related to cheap food produced in antibiotic-ridden dairies and on antibiotic-loaded factory farms, as well as pesticide-laced produce, have captured the attention of mainstream consumers. Given the fact that these chemicals are linked to cancer, hormone-disruption, diabetes, ADHD, and obesity, it's no wonder more people are looking to organic food similar to that grown by ancestors before the chemical revolution.

Compass Natural, an organic trends tracking firm, this month listed the top organic trends:

- (1) **Budgeting for Organic During Penny-Pinching Times:** While the economy remains stagnant, consumers are nevertheless embracing organic more than ever. In 2010, more than 40 percent of parents reported buying more organic foods today than they did a year ago, up more than 30 percent from 2009, according to the U.S. Families' Organic Attitudes & Beliefs 2010 tracking study. With increased demand comes increased acreage for organic agriculture, which protects the water and soil of neighbors. Between 2002 and 2008, the average acreage certified organic rose by 15 percent compared to last year. Generic-label organic products and direct farmer-to-consumer sales help keep organic food costs down for consumers.

How to tap into the trend: Look to sign up for a CSA, known as community-supported agriculture program, today. Consumers typically receive 10 to 20 percent off when they pay for a season's worth of produce the winter before a harvest, which is comparable to the discounts given in food manufacturer coupons.

- (2) **Concern over Chemicals in the Environment:** Think it's a coincidence that ADHD, cancer, and other ailments rose as chemical agriculture prospered? The President's Cancer Panel made it quite clear: Eat organic and reduce your risk of cancer. Contrary to what most people think, many systemic pesticides used in agriculture today actually transfer to inside the food we eat. A veggie wash isn't going to strip off potentially carcinogenic or neurotoxic pesticides.

How to tap into the trend: Join beekeepers worried about colony collapse disorder in the call to remove the most dangerous pesticides from the market. Remember, some of the same chemicals believed to be killing bees have been detected inside our potatoes and other favorite produce items. And buy organic! Studies have found that children who switch to an organic diet enjoy a dramatic reduction in pesticide levels in their bodies.

- (3) **Seeking Sustainable Packaging:** With bisphenol A and even gender-bending chemicals winding up in food packaging such as metal cans, some water bottles, and Styrofoam, organic consumers are leading the charge to use sustainable packaging like

¹ Rodale News, December 18, 2010

biodegradable packaging materials or better yet, less or no packaging. (Do we really need cucumbers stacked in Styrofoam trays and then wrapped in plastic?)

How to tap into the trend: Vote with your dollar by favoring products that are sensibly packaged; besides saving resources, that translates to less mess for you to throw away. Of course, if you shop farmer's markets and bring your own reusable bags, you can sidestep much of the packaging created by the food industry. If you grow your own food, store in glass, stainless steel, or other non-plastic containers.

- (4) **Digging In to Organic Gardening and Urban Agriculture:** The organic sector of the lawn and garden market has flourished in the last several years. And that's no wonder, since science is linking yard pesticides with childhood leukemia, lupus, and other diseases. Besides household organic gardens, organic-trend trackers find that urban farms are also on the rise as organizations revitalize areas like vacant lots with bountiful organic gardens.

How to tap into the trend: If you live in the city and think farming couldn't possible work there, read Novella Carpenter's *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* (Penguin, 2010) for inspiration. She raised not only vegetables, but chickens, ducks, rabbits, and even pigs in the ghetto of Oakland!

- (5) **Betting on Slow Money for Climate Stabilization:** Slow Money, the idea of investing in local sustainable businesses instead of investing solely in Wall Street, is gaining traction. Not only can this type of investment revitalize communities, but it also keeps toxins out of the food system. Beyond that, investing in more family-scale organic farms helps invest in a more stable planet. Sustainable agriculture generally uses 30 percent less energy inputs than chemically dependent farming systems. Organic agriculture also boosts the ability to heal the soil, allowing beneficial microorganisms to flourish and store more carbon in the soil.

How to tap into the trend: Visit LocalHarvest.org to find sustainable growers in your area, and invest in their efforts by diverting some of your food budget their way. Many can grow nearly year-round without using fossil-fuel energy thanks to more modern hoophouse designs. You not only get fresh, tasty food, you're helping the earth-friendly sustainable agriculture market to grow.

- (6) **Standing Up for Animal Rights:** It's easy to be tricked into thinking food is raised in a sustainable way when it's really not. But the problem is, many claims, like "natural" or "free-range" are not regulated. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic standards do put some limits on animal concentration, but there are large-scale organic operations that skirt the edges of the rules and don't treat their livestock as humanely as consumers may think. However, the rising interest in humane animal treatment is getting harder for marketers to ignore. Beginning January 1, Whole Foods Market, the largest retailer of natural and organic products, will require that all meat sold will be rated using new animal-welfare standards.

How to tap into the trend: For starters, learn what egg labels mean. If 2010 taught us anything, it's that 90 percent of eggs in this country come from tortured, caged hens that have only an area the size of a sheet of paper to move around in. Look for pastured eggs—which boost higher nutrient levels as well as more humane treatment of poultry—from local farmers. As a next resort, choose organic store-bought eggs.

- (7) **Rejecting GMOs:** Monsanto, the multinational company that led the charge in developing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is now paying farmers to use its competitors' pesticides because its own, Roundup, is not living up to its manufacturer's promise that using GMO seeds and Roundup together will result in less farm work. In fact, in just a few short years, overuse has created monstrous superweeds. GMO crops have been linked to precancerous growths, infertility, miscarriage, accelerated aging, and a high infant-mortality rate. GMOs offer no benefits to consumers. What's more, studies have found that organic yields are just as high as GMOs', and even higher in years of drought.

How to tap into the trend: GMOs are not allowed as ingredients in certified-organic food, and Non-GMO Project-verified foods are also tested to make sure the food isn't contaminated with GMO ingredients. (Look for the USDA organic label on food or search the Non-GMO Project database to keep harmful GMO ingredients off of your dinner plate.) For products not so designated, be especially wary when buying processed food: Most contain corn, soy, cotton, or canola ingredients, which are likely to come from GMO sources.

- (8) **Young Organic Farmers:** A younger generation's excitement about organic agriculture as a rewarding career is helping to clot a gushing loss of farmers in this country. According to USDA figures, the average American farmer is 57 years old and more than 25 percent of them are older than 65. But today, more young people are choosing working with organic crops over jobs in office cubicles as more and more consumers demand local, organic food.

How to tap into the trend: If you know someone who wants to learn how to be a farmer, suggest they look into Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms, known as WWOOF. The newly formed National Young Farmers' Coalition also offers tips to help younger people make sustainable agriculture a viable career.

- (9) **Looking for Local and Fair Trade:** Consumers not only want food that's healthy, they want to know where the food came from and how it was produced. But balancing all these concerns can be tricky.

How to tap into the trend: When it comes to buying food, the gold standard is to buy local AND organic. In her book *Organic Manifesto* (Rodale, 2010), Rodale CEO and longtime organic-farming advocate Maria Rodale explains that organic trumps local. That's because whether it's local or not, chemical-based agriculture poisons the soil, water, and us. When your choice is between conventional local food or organic grown farther away, always pick organic to protect your family and the environment from harmful chemicals. Want to keep more of your dollars close to home? Some small, local producers follow sustainable practices without being certified as organic; in such cases, you can visit the farm and talk to the grower to find out if his or her methods meet your standards. For consumer products we love, but which are typically grown out of area, look for a Fair Trade certification. Worker exploitation is notorious in the chocolate and coffee industries, so many companies get dual certification as Fair Trade and USDA organic to assure that workers are treated fairly and foods are chemical free and non-GMO. If you're looking to take things to the next level, try making your locale a Fair Trade Town, where consumers, retailers, and government officials work together to source as many Fair Trade products as possible.

- (10) **Understanding the True Cost of Cheap Food:** While it may be cheaper to buy meat and produce now than it was decades ago, it's clear we're paying for it in the long-run,

mainly in medical and environmental costs. One example? Factory farms in this country produce animals often tainted with cancer-causing hormones, antibiotics, or even arsenic. (A recent Food and Drug Administration report finds that nearly 30 million pounds of antibiotics are given to factory farm animals annually; this may contribute to the skyrocketing rate of MRSA, a germ that resists antibiotic treatment.) Other hidden costs: Pollution from concentrated animal-feeding operations can taint groundwater and air quality for neighbors and workers. And it's not just conventional meat production that's making us sick. Carcinogenic, hormone-disrupting neurotoxic chemicals frequently used in nonorganic agriculture are actually taken up *inside* the food that we eat. In fact, a recent leaked Environmental Protection Agency memo is linking a particular chemical used in corn, potato, cherry, and watermelon production to colony collapse disorder in bees. Just as freaky? We're eating that bee-killing chemical.

How to tap into the trend: Buy organic produce and grains (if you're strapped for cash, you'll find it very affordable to forgo meat products and instead get your protein from dried organic beans.) For meat and dairy, choose foods from sustainable farms, where the animals go outside and eat grass-based, organic diets. Search for others nationally through Eat Wild.