

Organic Agriculture

In 1995, U.S. consumers spend \$2.08 billion on organic foods. In 2006, U.S. consumers spent \$16.9 billion on organic foods and another \$11.3 billion on foods labeled natural. Recently, there has been much discussion on both types of foods. Is there a difference between the two?

The answer to this question is yes - there is a difference between natural and organic. In 2001, the USDA Organic Standards Act was passed. The standards ban the use of genetic engineering or irradiation in organic products. Foods that meet the new federal standards will bear a seal "USDA Organic". As a result of this legislation, the National Organic Program was developed in 2002.

In Montana, there are two primary certifying agencies that will certify food or fiber as "Organic". One is the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA). More information can be found at <http://www.ocia.org/>. The Montana Department of Agriculture (MDA) is the other agency and is currently authorized to certify foods as organic under the National Organic Program for local goods. From their website, MDA defines organic agriculture as, "an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony." Organic is a legal term as defined by the USDA.

Natural is a different designation. As far as the USDA is concerned, it applies to meat and poultry. The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) requires "natural" meat and poultry to be free of:

- Artificial colors
- Artificial flavors
- Sweeteners
- Preservatives
- Added or unnecessary ingredients
- Additional processing

They must be processed in such a way that they are not changed. The labels must also reflect that no such ingredients were used, but not in what manner they were raised. In essence, natural addresses an end product where organic addresses the process used to grow the product. Foods labeled "organic" must meet or exceed the National Organic Program standards.

In order for a product to be labeled as Organic, the producer must follow a process through the certifying agency. This process with MDA involves an application in writing, an office review, an on-site inspection including a system

plan, and inspection report, and final review process. When something is finally designated as organic, the USDA has defined this to mean:

- The product is not genetically modified
- There was no use of irradiation as a preservative
- For animals, there were no antibiotics or growth hormones used
- No feed used for animal production contained animal by-products
- No chemicals such as pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, or sewage sludge were used for grains.

With an increasing amount of U.S. consumers spending their grocery money on organic and natural foods, it is important to know what we are buying. There are several publications available online on both organic and natural foods. Two I used in writing this article were at:

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/AgOutlook/jun2000/ao272f.pdf> and at http://www.fmi.org/media/bg/natural_organic_foods.pdf. I would also encourage you to visit the Montana Department of Agriculture website specific to organic at <http://agr.mt.gov/organic/Program.asp>.

I would encourage you to find out more. If you have any questions, please contact me at the Extension office or email me at mbmajor@montana.edu.