

The Canadian Organic Grower

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EDITOR'S CORNER

Beyond organic?

When I told a writer that this issue was about different approaches to growing, he asked if it was about 'beyond organic.' It isn't. This magazine contains articles on several approaches to growing food—all within the scope of organic farming.

The term 'beyond organic' is bandied around by more and more people, often with the implication that their products, growing methods and/or philosophy are superior to organic.

Sometimes the expression is used by people who eschew organic certification. For example, Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm considers himself to be 'beyond organic.' There is no question in my mind that he is a great farmer and has made a huge contribution to sustainable agriculture through his talks and books (including *Salad Bar Beef* and *Pastured Poultry Profit*). But is he 'more organic' than the certified organic growers who also sell locally and have diverse small farms? One difference between the two is that certified organic growers feed their livestock organic grain, whereas Salatin buys grain grown with herbicides and champions his right to do so. I'm not condemning Salatin for using conventionally grown grain, but I question his stance.

'Beyond organic' is also used to describe certain farming approaches, such as biodynamic farming. At a biodynamic workshop I once attended, the speaker stated that, "unlike organic farmers," biodynamic farmers view the farm as a whole and try to maintain a closed loop of

nutrients. (He then explained how biodynamic preparations can be purchased from suppliers.)

I, like many organic growers, also see the farm as a whole and a somewhat closed system with its fertility grown on the farm through either livestock and/or green manures. This is just true organic farming.

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which is better, local or
organic, the best choice
—local organic—
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The first time I heard the expression 'beyond organic' was at the IFOAM 2002 Organic World Congress hosted by COG in Victoria, BC. Anne Schwartz, a long-time organic activist from the Pacific Northwest, talked about how the draft of the American organic standards was being weakened by corporate forces. She no longer wanted to be involved in a certification process that, in her view, was becoming meaningless. Sentiments like hers led to the writing of the Farmer's Pledge by the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), which follows. The pledge is intended to complement organic certification.

Local food movements are now also using the term 'beyond organic' and I have read several articles lately with headlines like "The New Organic" or "Better than Organic." In the discussion of which is better, local or organic, the best choice—local organic—seems to be ignored.

The drive to distance ourselves from the word 'organic' is partially a backlash against the huge market force of industrial organic food. The influx of corporate organics is a shock to many of us who have sat through peer review certification

meetings, developed educational campaigns over potluck dinners, and tried to live sustainably with organic food in our diets and environmental consciousness in our souls. But this doesn't mean we should put organics on a plate and

give it to corporate America.

Tempting as it may be to create a schism, such as calling industrial organic 'below organic,' I think we should drop all such divisions. We are too small to allow such partitions. Let's work together, whether you are a biodynamic farmer who feels that livestock and cosmic energy are essential parts of a healthy farm, a veganic grower who feels animals should not be used on farms, a prairie farmer growing a thousand acres of organic grain, or a non-certified organic gardener.

We may have different practices and our own foibles, but we all believe in growing healthy food in a way that is good for our environment and our communities. If you are a processor (or maybe the term is 'manufacturer') interested in producing organic junk food or starting up the organic equivalent of a factory farm, welcome to our community but understand that we won't relinquish the word 'organic' without a struggle.

When J.I. Rodale first used the term 'organic' in the title of *Organic Farming and Gardening*, I don't imagine he was thinking of, say, organic fast food made from ingredients from around the globe. True organic farming is sustainable farming. We all know what that really means, regardless of what the standards allow.

The Farmer's Pledge defines what many of us consider organic to be. Hopefully we will work together to maintain this comprehensive and, in my view, true definition of organics.

—Janet Wallace
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Farmer's Pledge

We pledge that in our farming, marketing and processing, we will:

- Reject the use of synthetic insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and fertilizers;
- Reject the use of GMOs, chemically treated seeds, synthetic toxic materials, irradiation and sewage sludge;
- Treat livestock humanely by providing pasture for ruminants, access to outdoors and fresh air for all livestock, banning cruel alterations, and using no hormones or antibiotics in feed;
- Support agricultural markets and infrastructures that enable small farms to thrive;
- Maintain healthy soils by farming practices that include rotating crops annually, using compost, cover crops and green manures, and reducing tillage;
- Conserve natural resources by reducing erosion and pollution of air, soil and water through responsible farming practices;
- Maximize the nutritional value of food and feed by practicing careful post-harvest handling;
- Practice minimal processing for all food products to preserve the natural nutritional value of food: No use of irradiation, ultra-pasteurization, excessive heat, synthetic preservatives, or GMO processing agents or additives;
- Reduce the ecological footprint of farms and homes by limiting energy use and converting to renewable sources of energy;
- Reduce food miles by selling produce locally and regionally;
- Create beneficial habitat for wildlife and encourage biodiversity;
- Help preserve farmland and farming know-how;
- Ensure food safety by using potable water for washing crops;
- Handle raw manure and soil amendments with care;
- Use ethical business practices;
- Pay a living wage to all farm workers and acknowledge their freedom of association and their right to collective bargaining;
- Treat family members and farm workers with respect, and ensure their safety on the farm;
- Work in cooperation with other farmers and with the neighbouring community to create a more sustainable way of life;
- Sustain the land in healthy condition for future generations.

The Farmer's Pledge is reprinted with permission from the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY) www.nofany.org.