

The Canadian Organic Grower

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EDITOR'S CORNER

The value of organic

At a forum for food security several years ago, I was just finding my name tag when a food bank worker introduced herself to me. I told her that I worked with Canadian Organic Growers. She immediately attacked me and organic farmers as a whole. She said that it is inappropriate and unethical for farmers to charge so much for their produce. In a community with so much hunger, she asked, how can they charge 'exorbitant' prices for food?

It is a conundrum that many organic farmers face. Rock-bottom supermarket prices do not cover the production costs of organic food, or even those of local conventional food. So organic farmers charge more and, as a result, many fit the cliché of the starving artist—making little money themselves while their patrons and customers are relatively wealthy. Also, like many artists, organic farmers often devote much passion and creativity to their work.

Why don't more people buy organic food? Higher prices are a barrier to the bargain-seeking consumer—but that doesn't mean that organic food is expensive. When the environmental and social costs of imported and conventionally grown food are added, the real price of conventional food is much greater.

Some people who are unwilling to pay a fair price for organic produce may easily spend considerable amounts of money on meals in restaurants. I don't

mean to criticize people who go to restaurants. I am just pointing out that some people are willing to pay a lot for food if it is delicious, convenient and offered with a certain ambience.

Just as a dinner in a fine restaurant is worth more than the cost of the ingredients, by buying locally grown organic products, you are buying more than just something to eat—you are contributing to a healthy environment, enhancing biodiversity, leading to the humane treatment of animals, and supporting rural communities. The price is not necessarily high. I just bought my winter's worth of organic dried goods in bulk. The cost of organic flour, grain, pulses and dried fruit was equivalent to a dinner for two in an upscale restaurant.

Organic food is certainly tasty. I remember shopping with my brother at a farmers' market. As he bought something organic, he quipped: "twice the cost but twice the flavour." He knew the food was worth its price.

The nutritional advantages of organic food are now becoming widely recognized. The European Union is funding research to examine the nutritional differences between organic and conventional produce. Preliminary results indicate that, compared to conventionally grown food, organic produce has more nutrients, minerals, vitamins and healthy plant compounds, such as phenols, flavonoids and lycopene.*

Cover photo credit: Willie Curry of Hilltop Pastures

Cover photo: (L-R) Ken & Joan Marisett, Peter Finch, Peter Southwood, Didi Curry and Anne van der Heyden, members of the Quinte Organic Farmers' Co-operative, sort organic produce to be sold at Toronto's Brick Works Farmers' Market.

Given that organic farmers are producing healthy food in an environmentally sustainable way, it is inappropriate that many are struggling financially. Why do we accept that doctors and pharmacists receive so much more money to treat diseases than the people who produce the food that might prevent these health problems in the first place?

Organic farmers aren't the only growers with low incomes. In fact, organic farmers tend to have better net incomes than conventional farmers because their input costs are lower, their yields are comparable, and their prices are higher. In 2005, the average net conventional farm income (not including government payments) was -\$10,000. Yes, that's a negative sign in front.

The situation seems to be improving. Shopping for locally grown organic food is becoming easier with the rise of organic home delivery programs, CSAs and farmers' markets. Such direct marketing provides both farmers and consumers with a good deal. Consumers get fresh food and the wonderful opportunity to meet the people who grow their food. Farmers get direct feedback, encouragement and the whole retail dollar.

Stores and distributors also play an essential role, although their support of local organic farmers varies. For example, according to Ted Zettel of Organic Meadow, many large supermarkets have little to no (0-5%) mark-up on conventional milk but apply a 40% mark-up on organic milk. Fortunately, consumers have alternatives. In this issue, we profile two stores that provide healthy food for their customers while supporting local organic growers.

By buying locally grown organic products, you are buying more than just something to eat.

At the food security event mentioned earlier, I talked about the situation of organic farmers and how little of the food dollar actually goes to the farmers. At the end of the forum, the woman who had confronted me told me that she had never considered the role of the farmer in food security. She now realized that cheap food wasn't the solution to malnutrition; we don't need to lower the price of food but rather increase people's ability to buy

good food. She thanked me for helping her understand this.

I share some of her concerns. I don't want to be part of an elitist food system that fills only the tables of the wealthy. I hope that more people can make a living by growing affordable organic food. Progress is being made on many fronts. For example, COG is coordinating programs to bring organic food to children in daycare centres. Also, many farms and organizations provide organic food to low-income families (some have been profiled in this magazine).

Part of the role of organic growers is education. We need to let people know how their food is grown and what impact this has on their health, our environment and rural culture. Let's work together to help Canadians realize that their food dollars can support local organic farm communities, which in turn can nourish us all.

—Janet Wallace
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* www.soilassociation.org/web/sa/saweb.nsf/4042794258a20f4280256a680046b77e7a54a18f894fee45802571bc00443124!OpenDocument



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