

# ASK A CERTIFIER

by Debbie Miller

## *The label says the product is 'natural'—how is that different from 'certified organic'?*

If you walk down the aisles of your local supermarket, you'll see a multitude of products claiming to be 'green' or 'natural.' Marketers know that consumers will buy products that are healthier and better for the environment, so it seems everyone wants to get on the bandwagon. But what makes a product natural? Is 'all-natural' the same as 'organic'? While most people have a commonsense idea of what 'natural' is or should be, there is no formal, unified definition or standard. It generally refers to the processing stage of the product, not necessarily the growing stage. It usually means that nothing 'unnatural' (e.g. dyes, flavouring, etc.) has been added. There is no audit trail required, and no guarantee of traceability. There are no regulations on inputs used, and while the food may have been grown using organic management techniques, it may not have been. Since there are no standards and no one is checking, it is even possible that the package may include products of genetic engineering.

This confusion over terms is one of the reasons why the Canadian government has decided to join over forty other international governments in implementing an organic regulation. We are following in the footsteps of Japan (1990), the E.U. (1992), the U.S. (2002) and China (2005).

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### **Organic certification provides traceability from field to fork.**

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Certified organic food growers, handlers, processors and retailers adhere to standards that maintain the integrity of their products—and they can prove it. While the organic standards are fairly complex (they literally fill a book), there are some basic rules.

- No genetically engineered (GE) organisms.
- The "Separation Rule" means no physical contact between the organic product and any prohibited substances.

- The "Segregation Rule" means no physical contact between the unpacked organic product and a conventional product.

- Animals are raised humanely without growth hormones or antibiotics<sup>1</sup>.

- Documentation at every stage demonstrates compliance with agricultural standards and consistency between the product produced (and/or stored) and sales.

Few growers enjoy spending the time and effort that goes into their audit trail, but those records are necessary to verify the source, production techniques, transfer of ownership and transportation of any agricultural product, or organic ingredients. There is traceability from field to fork. Annual third party inspections verify compliance with organic standards through the growing and processing stages. They provide a critical function in protecting consumer confidence.

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Certified organic is not a guarantee that a product will be one hundred percent chemical-free. The only place that could be considered to be 'chemical-free' is a vacuum; and organic food is certainly not grown there! We certify the process, not the product. While everyone who handles the food, from the farmer through the processor, does everything within their power to protect that food from contamination, while adhering to established standards, there are some things that are beyond anyone's control. The example I always use is the documented case of agricultural chemicals showing up in rainwater. Although the organic farmer would never put those products on his crop—he can't keep them out of the rain.

If you are concerned about the food you feed yourself and your family, and about the working conditions for everyone involved at any stage of producing that food, the absolute best thing to do is to buy your food from someone you know—someone who shares your values, concerns and principles. Much of the food I serve on my table is not certified organic. However, it comes from the farms and gardens of farmers I know well. Although it is not certified, I am confident that it is the best food available because I have visited the farms and spent countless hours discussing production methods and philosophies. When I must

buy food from strangers, whether at a large grocery chain or a farmers' market, I look for verification that someone else has visited the farm, talked to the farmer, and asked about all the things I would wonder about if I had the time and opportunity to visit the farm. The certification stamp tells me exactly what methods they have used, and assures me that a third party has verified it all. The natural label just doesn't do it.

—Debbie Miller  
OCIA Canada

1. Antibiotics are allowed in emergencies under specific conditions for dairy cows and for bee hives. After its use in a proven emergency, there is a 30-day withdrawal period before the milk can be sold as organic. This is more than twice as long as the withdrawal period required in conventional herds (the label withdrawal time for some drugs is only a few days). If beehives are treated with antibiotics, they must be taken out of organic production for one year.

## Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario



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## Remember to renew your membership.

### *Visionary Farmers and Consumers – One Day Conference* Growing & Eating for Nourishment – Nourishing the Future



If you care about the foods you eat, how visionary farmers grow for quality, and the larger benefits of being organic this conference is for you. It's time to acknowledge the science behind the benefits of organic food, and it's time to act on what we know. **Presented by Canadian Organic Growers**

**Saturday, February 21 9:00 am – 5:00 pm**  
89 Chestnut St., U of T Conference Centre  
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