

Organic Foods



**HOT
TOPICS**



Organic Foods

by Debra A. Miller

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FOREWORD

Young people today are bombarded with information. Aside from traditional sources such as newspapers, television, and the radio, they are inundated with a nearly continuous stream of data from electronic media. They send and receive e-mails and instant messages, read and write online “blogs,” participate in chat rooms and forums, and surf the Web for hours. This trend is likely to continue. As Patricia Senn Breivik, the dean of university libraries at Wayne State University in Detroit, states, “Information overload will only increase in the future. By 2020, for example, the available body of information is expected to double every 73 days! How will these students find the information they need in this coming tidal wave of information?”

Ironically, this overabundance of information can actually impede efforts to understand complex issues. Whether the topic is abortion, the death penalty, gay rights, or obesity, the deluge of fact and opinion that floods the print and electronic media is overwhelming. The news media report the results of polls and studies that contradict one another. Cable news shows, talk radio programs, and newspaper editorials promote narrow viewpoints and omit facts that challenge their own political biases. The World Wide Web is an electronic minefield where legitimate scholars compete with the postings of ordinary citizens who may or may not be well-informed or capable of reasoned argument. At times, strongly worded testimonials and opinion pieces both in print and electronic media are presented as factual accounts.

Conflicting quotes and statistics can confuse even the most diligent researchers. A good example of this is the question of whether or not the death penalty deters crime. For instance, one study found that murders decreased by nearly one-third when

the death penalty was reinstated in New York in 1995. Death penalty supporters cite this finding to support their argument that the existence of the death penalty deters criminals from committing murder. However, another study found that states without the death penalty have murder rates below the national average. This study is cited by opponents of capital punishment, who reject the claim that the death penalty deters murder. Students need context and clear, informed discussion if they are to think critically and make informed decisions.

The Hot Topics series is designed to help young people wade through the glut of fact, opinion, and rhetoric so that they can think critically about controversial issues. Only by reading and thinking critically will they be able to formulate a viewpoint that is not simply the parroted views of others. Each volume of the series focuses on one of today's most pressing social issues and provides a balanced overview of the topic. Carefully crafted narrative, fully documented primary and secondary source quotes, informative sidebars, and study questions all provide excellent starting points for research and discussion. Full-color photographs and charts enhance all volumes in the series. With its many useful features, the Hot Topics series is a valuable resource for young people struggling to understand the pressing issues of the modern era.



INTRODUCTION

ORGANIC GOES MAINSTREAM

Once confined to health food stores and favored mostly by hippies or health fanatics, organic food in recent years has experienced rapid growth. Although the organic market still represents only about 2.5 percent of the total retail food sales in the United States, the organic market has grown at the rate of about 15 to 20 percent each year into a \$15 billion industry. This expanding interest in organics is not limited to the United States; organic food is also booming in European countries such as Germany, Britain, Italy, and France, and gaining acceptance around the world. In addition, some developing countries such as China, Brazil, and Uruguay have become important producers of organic crops. Many experts see no limits to the expansion of the organic industry.

An Interest in Health

The growing popularity of organic foods has been driven largely by increasing consumer interest in diets that promote health, prevent disease, and protect the environment. Supporters say organic foods are healthier and better for the environment because they are not grown with chemical fertilizers or pesticides or other ingredients believed to be toxins. Indeed, as food marketing consultant Laurie Demeritt points out, “The word ‘organic’ has become synonymous with ‘health’ and ‘healthier lifestyle.’”¹ In fact, consumer demand for organic products doubled between 2000 and 2006, and according to the Food Marketing Institute, more than half of American consumers buy organic food at least once a month. And an increasing number



Organic foods are no longer sold just at farmers' markets and small health food stores. As this sign shows, they are now being sold in mainstream grocery stores throughout the United States.

of Americans—as many as 10 percent—are buying only organic produce.

As a result of this strong consumer demand, organic foods are no longer sold only at farmers' markets and small health food stores; now, they can also be found in large natural food stores and mainstream supermarkets throughout the United States. Beginning in 2000, more organic food was purchased in regular supermarkets than in any other type of retail outlet. Experts say the biggest obstacle preventing more people from buying organic foods tends to be price. Currently, most organic fruits and vegetables cost between 10 and 30 percent more than conventionally grown produce. Frozen, processed, and animal organic products can cost even more, sometimes 50 to 100 percent more than their non-organic counterparts. To respond to this concern, a number of mainstream grocers, such as Safeway and Costco, have begun to develop their own private label

organic products and offer somewhat lower prices than those charged in natural food markets.

The Wal-Mart Factor

Perhaps the biggest recent development in the organic food market, however, was Wal-Mart's announcement in 2006 that it would expand its stock of organic foods and price its organic food only 10 percent above the prices of non-organic produce. Wal-Mart has been extremely successful at buying items in bulk from around the world and then selling them at bargain prices. Its supercenter stores added some organic items to their shelves about five years ago, but Wal-Mart's 2006 decision to increase organic sales, experts say, means the company is betting that it can duplicate its bargain marketing strategy in the organic food market.

Wal-Mart's entry into organic food sales is expected to further boost the sales of organic food, but it also has stirred up controversy. Some commentators welcomed the announcement, believing that it would be good for the organic market. As *Natural Life* magazine explained, "Wal-Mart's economy of scale will lead to greater accessibility and lower prices for consumers of organic foods...[and] increased demand...for organic farmers and processors."² Others criticized the Wal-Mart development as a threat to the quality of organic foods. Wal-Mart's practices of using global supply sources and transporting food for long distances, critics say, will skirt and possibly weaken national organic standards, and hurt the environment by increasing carbon emissions that cause global warming. Wal-Mart is also expected to rely on large corporate farm sources for its organic products, making the market more competitive for the small farmers and retailers who first developed the organic market. As Ronnie Cummins, director of the Organic Consumers Association, has explained, "With Wal-Mart and other folks jumping in, what will happen down the road is the small- and medium-size operators will be forced out of business."³

Since Wal-Mart's 2006 announcement, critics have found even more reasons for concern as reports surfaced about possible fraudulent marketing practices. A September 2006 re-