



It's very politically correct to buy organic food but is it the right thing to do? Rob Holdway tells us how to go organic the right way

go organic

Supermarkets have embraced the organic food market in recent years.

Most now have separate organic fruit and veg sections, selling produce that looks exactly the same as bog standard fare – but costs more and is apparently better for you. But is it?

For many of us, the weekly grocery shop has become a chore. Gone are the days when our biggest concern was what to feed the family for a tasty, nutritious meal. It's now a battle of the conscience as we try to decide between organic, local and fair-trade produce and the not so eco-friendly or ethical alternatives.

With the credit crunch biting it's tempting to question if there's any actual benefit to choosing expensive organic produce over the supermarket value brands. But the answer is a resounding yes – the groceries you buy can have environmental, social and economic benefits and what's more they may even improve your health... and conscience.

Food for thought

With so many different ways of saying food is organic, it can become incredibly confusing when it comes to deciding which products to buy. One leading supermarket has six choices of bananas on offer, and even offers a branded fair-trade kids variety.

Despite this confusion, we do seem to be switching to organic produce and in 2006, sales of organic food and drinks reached £2billion. While this is only 2% of UK food sales, in some categories such as baby food, organic accounts for as much as 40% of sales.

Be friendly

Conventional farming methods use vast amounts of petrochemicals, including nitrogen fertilizers, which leach into our water supplies. Excess nitrogen causes 'dead zones' in rivers, streams and ponds, destroying the natural habitat of marine life meaning they can no longer survive.

These fertilisers release nitrous oxide into the atmosphere, too – this is a greenhouse gas with an effect on climate change 300 times that of CO₂. Organic farmers, in contrast, keep their soil fertile naturally through crop rotation. This encourages biodiversity, which helps to increase the number of insects, birds and butterflies.

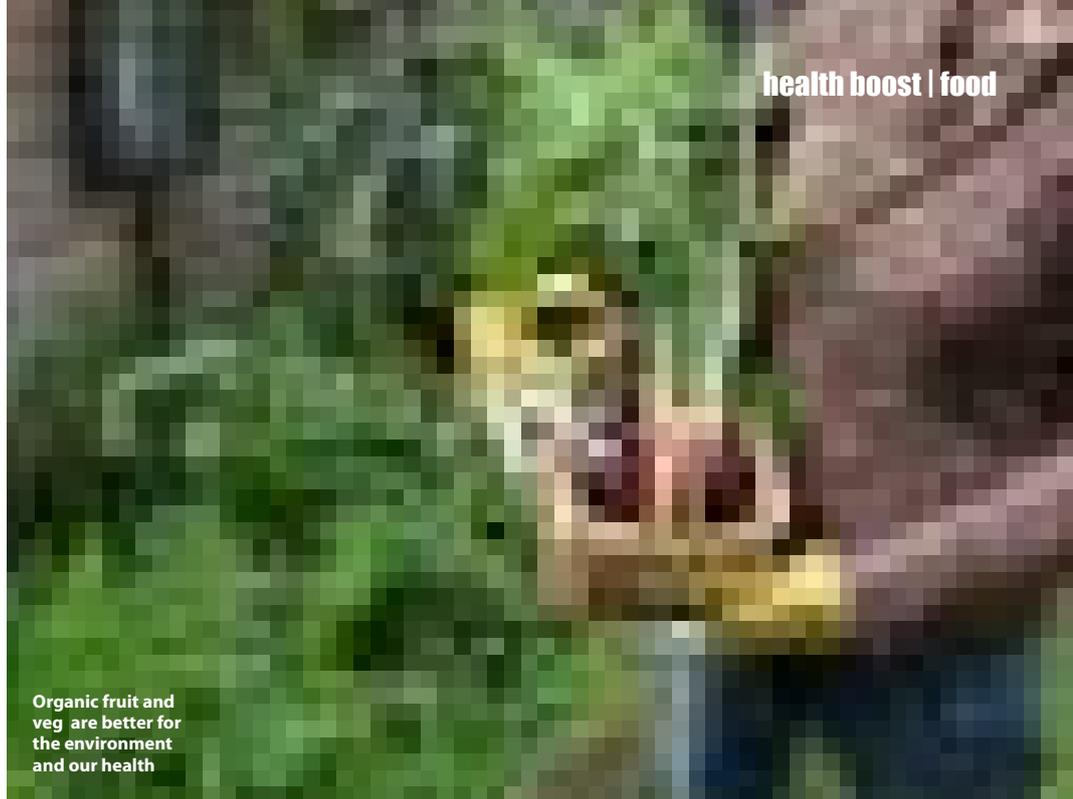
No GM

The strict standards by which organic farmers operate do not permit the use of genetically modified crops. In contrast, over one million tonnes of GM crops are fed to livestock to produce most of the non organic bacon, milk and cheese on sale. GM crops may threaten local plant varieties and there are concerns that using plants resistant to weedkiller may produce 'superweeds'. Even more worryingly, the longterm effects of GM food on human health are still unknown. Organic food is better for the environment – fact.

Animal care

Animal welfare standards in organic farming are high. Livestock must be free-range and the number of animals permitted in a given area is limited. Intensively farmed animals, however, live in cramped conditions and spend most of their lives indoors.

The average broiler (intensively farmed) chicken lives in an area the size of an A4 piece of paper. What's more, since it's difficult to clean between the tightly packed birds, they spend most of their lives standing in their own litter.



Organic fruit and veg are better for the environment and our health

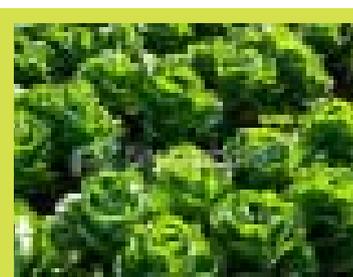


Living in such overcrowded conditions makes intensively farmed livestock susceptible to the spread of disease and parasites. To prevent and treat this, antibiotics are routinely given to whole herds in their food and water. Since organic livestock are reared free range, the spread of disease between them is much less and parasite problems are managed naturally, by regularly moving the herds to new pastures.

Living better

Organic livestock live longer, happier lives. A typical broiler chicken is bred to grow as quickly as possible. Its body muscle grows much faster than its limbs and organs with the result that its legs cannot support its own body weight and many die prematurely of heart failure as a result. Those that survive long enough reach slaughter weight at 42 days unlike their organic counterparts who are permitted to live twice as long allowing natural,

IN 2006, ORGANIC FOOD AND DRINK SALES NUDGED THE £2 BILLION MARK FOR THE FIRST TIME



ROB'S TOP FIVE ORGANIC MUSTS

- 1 Milk**
Organic milk is naturally higher in omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin E, vitamin A and certain other antioxidants than non-organic. It is also 38% more energy efficient to produce than the non-organic variety.
- 2 Chicken and eggs**
The horrific conditions that intensively farmed poultry is kept in is enough to ruin anyone's Sunday roast.
- 3 Strawberries**
Grown conventionally strawberries contain the highest chemical levels of any produce, as along with other soft fruit prone to fungal attack, they are sprayed with pesticides.
- 4 Lettuce**
Like spinach and other leafy vegetables, pesticides get trapped in the leaves.
- 5 Cotton**
More of our textiles are made from cotton than from any other material and the vast amounts of petrochemicals sprayed on the non-organic stuff harms both the environment and the workers in the cotton fields.

balanced growth. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall won 'Campaigner of the Year' at *The Observer* Ethical Awards for his straightforward and compelling tackling of intensive chicken farming methods. Hugh's campaign led to a vote by Tesco's 250,000 shareholders, aimed at forcing Tesco to adopt new animal welfare standards. Although, only 9% voted in favour it shows there is some interest in the issue that cannot be ignored. The power lies with us, the consumers. Major supermarkets won't change their practices unless we choose to buy free range and organic.

Better for us

The mainstream food we consume is routinely pumped with additives to increase shelf life and improve flavour. Out of 290 food additives approved for use in the EU, such as hydrogenated fats and artificial sweeteners, only 32 are permitted in organic food.

Conventional farmers regularly spray their crops with over 300 permitted pesticides, residues of which remain on conventional food. Organic standards aim to avoid pesticide use wherever possible and when deemed absolutely necessary they permit farmers to use just seven of the hundreds available. So organic food is better for the environment, and livestock, and may even prove better for our health.

The money issue

Organic options may appear to blow the budget, but it's important to look at the real cost of our food. It's not just the price at the checkout that affects us, but also the taxes, which subsidise its production and the cost of cleaning up the environmental damage it creates.

Billions of pounds of tax-payers money goes towards subsidising the agricultural industry, most of which benefits large intensive farms. Another portion of our taxes pays to rectify the damage caused to our soils, waterways and ecosystems through the excessive use of pesticides and fertilisers. Add to this the costs to animal life and those 'cheap' supermarket own brands don't seem like such good value after all.

If the demand for organic food increases then prices should come down. And if you're still convinced you can't afford it, consider the £424 worth of edible food that each of us throws away every year. That's the equivalent of around 26 organic vegetable delivery boxes a year. If we all put a stop to this waste we'd



have a lot less food piling up on landfill sites and a lot more cash in our pockets.

Keep it local

Food miles is a big issue and most of us place the blame on the aviation industry. However, only 0.1% of UK food miles are due to air freight.

Most of the environmental costs of transporting food come from road haulage by manufacturers and retailers, and car transport by consumers travelling to and from shops. The easiest way to cut your dinner's food miles is to walk to the shops, or if you must drive, combine it with another essential journey such as going to work or to the recycling bank.

Buying British, instead of imported food, can reduce your grocery's environmental footprint by 54% compared to a diet based entirely on imports. It supports local businesses and creates jobs in our country, too.

We currently import 95% of our fruit and 50% of our vegetables, which seems crazy when there's plenty of good quality food being produced on our own soils. Most areas now host farmer's markets but if there isn't one near you check out the Soil Association website at www.localfoodweb.co.uk

Be fair

Fair trade is about better prices, decent working conditions, local sustainability, and fair terms of trade for farmers and workers in the developing world. There are over 3,000 fair trade products available in UK shops, each clearly marked with the Fairtrade certification mark. Fair trade addresses the many

CHECK THE LABEL

● The Soil Association's symbol is the UK's main certification mark and appears on approximately 70% of organically produced food in the UK.

● The Fairtrade mark is an independent consumer label that appears on UK products as a guarantee that they have been certified against internationally agreed fair trade standards. The Fairtrade mark is a registered certification label for products sourced from producers in developing countries.

● The Red Tractor symbol seen on products as diverse as potatoes and meat, milk and apples is an independent assurance scheme for homegrown food. The food must be farmed and packed in the UK and meet strict hygiene, safety and welfare standards at all stages.

injustices of conventional trade, which traditionally discriminates against the poorest, weakest producers. It enables them to improve their position and have more control over their lives. Fair trade companies work in partnership with small scale producers across the developing world and reinvest up to 60% of profits into growers businesses for them to build a better future for their communities. Today, more than seven million people in Africa, Asia and Latin America benefit from fair trade. And the UK market for fair trade products is doubling in value every two years.



ROB'S TOP FIVE FAIR TRADE FOOD MUSTS

Most UK fair trade sales are in tea, coffee and bananas. But here are some other items to consider:

- 1 Sugar**
Tate & Lyle are switching all their own label retail sugar to Fairtrade certified sugar. The move will benefit more than 6,000 farmers from Belize, who will receive Fairtrade premiums of around US \$4 million (£2 million) for investment in their community, in the first year alone.
- 2 Cotton**
Fairtrade cotton sales rose a staggering 660% in 2007, with sales reaching the £35 million mark. Look out for Fairtrade cotton on the high street.
- 3 Flowers**
Fairtrade bouquets delivered to the door are great news for rose growers in Kenya and romantic hearts here at home – available online from John Lewis, Interflora, Sainsbury's, Asda and Tesco.
- 4 Alcohol**
More of us are drinking Fairtrade certified alcohol than ever before. And churchgoers can sing the praises of new Fairtrade Communion Wine, too!
- 5 Footballs**
This certified Fairtrade football is compliant with official ball standards. It's produced by the first company in Pakistan to sign up to a fair trade scheme giving workers higher wages and improved conditions and health care.



organic

what it takes
to go organic

Making the choice

If there are benefits to organic, local and fair-trade how do we choose between them? Well we don't have to. A shopping basket comprising a mixture of all three is ideal. Buy seasonal, organic food, produced locally as much as you can. And as for those treats like bananas and coffee which can't be produced locally, ensure you give foreign farmers the best deal possible by choosing Fairtrade certified varieties.

An organic diet is without doubt better for the environment, and arguably healthier for us. When we consider the broader social and environmental impact of what we buy, it's clear that choosing organic, fair trade products is better for us, for the planet and for society as a whole.