

# NATURAL! NO SPRAY! SUSTAINABLE!

## A DO-IT-YOURSELF GUIDE TO NON-CERTIFIED “ORGANIC” FOOD

HELPING YOU ASK THE RIGHT  
QUESTIONS AT THE FARMERS MARKET.

This guide helps you ask the right questions at the farmers market to ensure that you are supporting the kind of agriculture that creates the healthiest food while caring for farm animals and the environment.



**L**ocal farm stands, CSAs and farmers markets can give you access to some of the freshest and healthiest seasonal food directly from the people who produce it. Farm stands, farmers markets and CSAs also create community around food, advancing the good food movement while supporting your neighborhood's vitality.

However, simply shopping at a farmers market does not guarantee that all of the food for sale was grown locally or responsibly. There are instances of greenwashing at farmers markets, ranging from reselling industrial produce that was bought wholesale, to “no-spray” and “natural” signs that may, or may not, mean what you think they do.

If you are looking for fresh, healthy and environmentally friendly local food, the first step is to ask a farmer at the market if their farm is certified organic.

Real organic farms practice humane animal husbandry, take care of the land, and do not use synthetic agrichemicals. Reward local certified organic farms with your food dollars and you'll be getting the most nutritious, delicious, fresh food, while supporting environmental health and your community's economy.

If there are no certified organic farms in your area that sell directly to the public, you can often still find food that was produced in the spirit of organic, even if it is not certified. Many smaller direct-marketing farms forgo organic certification because they are able to talk directly to their customers, explaining their production practices in person.

This guide helps you ask the right questions at farmers markets and farm stands, or when joining a CSA, to ensure that you are supporting the kind of agriculture that creates the healthiest food while caring for farm animals and the environment.



CORNUCOPIA  
INSTITUTE

# 1 IS IT LOCAL?

## WHO GREW THIS FOOD? WHERE WAS IT GROWN?

When you ask “Who grew this food?” and “Where was it grown?” you are looking for an answer like “We grew this food on our farm down the road.”

Sometimes it is not necessary to even ask. There are two types of farmers market models. Producer-only markets only allow vendors who actually grew the food they are selling. (Exception: Some state and market-specific rules allow farmers to sell a small amount of product from another farmer, or produce grown out of state, or baked goods containing ingredients that are not local.)

If a market does not explicitly identify itself as producer-only, you can find out by asking the market manager or any of the vendors. Market managers can often be found in a welcome tent and are usually happy to talk with customers about the market. Often, the market rules can also be found on the farmers market website.

You can ask the manager of a producer-only market if they make farm visits and require crop plans. These requirements are relatively common at producer-only markets.

The other farmers market model allows vendors to resell products that they bought wholesale. In such a market, the produce may have been shipped from faraway states or from other countries. It is typically not local, most likely not seasonal, nor organic. If it is organic, it may have traveled hundreds or thousands of miles before being displayed at the market. If this is the case, it may be better to support a local non-certified farmer, as long as the farmer is transparent about their practices.

If your local farmers market is not a producer-only market,

then it is likely that reselling is happening. You will have to ask additional questions to understand if a particular vendor meets your expectations.

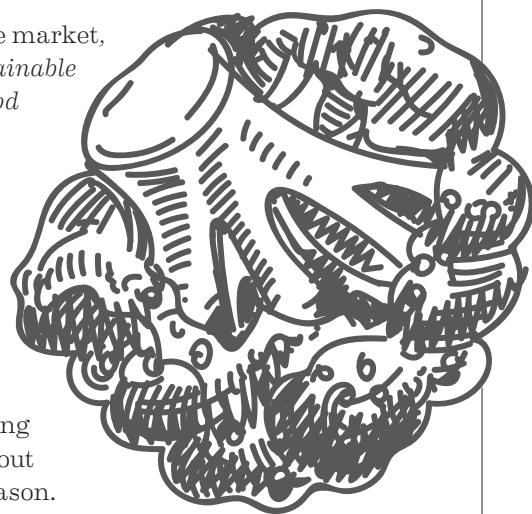
## WHAT IS IN SEASON RIGHT NOW?

It's common to assume that vegetables and fruits at a local farmers market are produced locally, but this is not always true.

A way to uncover fraud is to know what's in season in your area before you go to the market. If a stand displays vegetables or fruits that are not in season, they may not be locally grown. Especially take note if a vendor offers a wide variety of unseasonal items or exotic fruits that cannot be grown in your region.

Before you go to the market, check out *The Sustainable Table's Seasonal Food Guide*, which helps you determine what fruits and vegetables are in season where you live.

However, there are some ways for local farmers to bring produce to market out of its traditional season. Many legitimate local farmers use hoop houses or heated greenhouses for this purpose. This practice helps farms economically and allows for fresh local greens or tomatoes during a longer season than would otherwise be possible. So when considering what is in season, it's important to ask “Who grew this food?” and “How was it grown?” as well.



# 2 HOW WAS IT GROWN?

## IS YOUR FARM CERTIFIED ORGANIC?

Usually farmers that go out of their way to acquire organic certification will proudly state this on their farmers market sign. You can also ask to see a copy of the farm's organic certificate if it's not on display.

By law, under the USDA's National Organic Program, farmers who market their products as "organic" must be certified by a USDA-accredited, third-party certifier. The one exception is if the grower earns less than \$5,000 a year. In this circumstance, the farm doesn't need to be independently certified but is still required to keep records to prove the organic requirements are met.

Buying local AND certified organic should be your first choice. Organic certification offers the highest guarantee of authenticity and your patronage rewards farmers who have made the extra investment of their time and money to support the overall organic community.

If a farm is not certified organic, ask some questions to determine whether its products meet your expectations.

## WHY AREN'T YOU CERTIFIED ORGANIC?

A farmer who earns less than \$5,000 a year is exempt from certification under the National Organic Program rules.

Certification for farms making between \$5,001 and \$20,000 annually often costs around \$250 per year because of a federal program that refunds 75% of the certification cost, when funds are available.

That is relatively inexpensive for a certification that requires an annual visit by a trained inspector and might allow the farmer to receive higher prices for their products. But it is true that farmers' margins are often thin, especially for newer farmers, so some forgo the certification cost. In addition, the subsidy is in the form of a pay back, so some farms might not be in a financial position to front the \$1,000 for certification and wait to be reimbursed.



Other farmers that are truly farming in the spirit of organic may opt out of the certification program for various reasons. Some common reasons include: temporarily leasing land, farming multiple plots (making certification more expensive), or only selling directly to consumers (allowing the farmer to explain their production practices face to face). Some farmers may also take issue with the documented cases of corruption that the USDA organic program has ignored. These farmers may see the system as broken and not worth their investment.

By asking some questions of non-certified producers, you can make sure that the farmer walks their talk, and you will likely learn about their philosophy and how your food is being grown.

## HAVE YOU EVER BEEN CERTIFIED ORGANIC IN THE PAST?

If a farm was certified organic in the past, it is likely that they may continue to farm with the same practices and that they have only stopped doing the paperwork to be certified.

It's helpful to follow this question by asking, "Why did you give up certification?" and, "Have your practices changed in any way since then?"

## IF IT IS NOT CERTIFIED ORGANIC, HOW WAS THIS FOOD GROWN?

There are instances of "greenwashing" at farmers markets. If a farm is not certified organic, then no inspector is checking to verify that "no-spray," "chemical-free," "natural," or "grown using organic methods" claims are true.

In general, when a farm is operating as organic in spirit, the grower will likely want to talk about their production practices. Ask some of the following open-ended questions about the farm's approach to managing soil fertility and controlling weeds, diseases, and pests.

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY NO-SPRAY?

"No-spray" and "spray-free" declarations are common at farmers markets.

If a sign says "no spray," you can ask when the last time was that they applied any agrichemicals to their land. Spraying field borders and paths with Roundup®, for instance, goes against the spirit of organic.

While "spray" is often equated with synthetic chemicals, there are several organic-approved "spray" products. These are not nearly as toxic as synthetic agrichemicals. They include plant, seaweed and fish-based fertilizers, and organic pesticides, such as soaps, oils or "biological controls" derived from beneficial microorganisms.

If a farmer claims not to be spraying anything, you may want to ask how they control pests and diseases. And, while a farmer may not spray toxic pesticides, this does not mean that they are practicing organic management. They may be using petroleum-based fertilizers.

## DO YOU BUY ORGANIC SEED?

Organic farmers are required to use certified organic seeds and plants unless organic varieties are not commercially available. A certified organic farm cannot use non-organic seeds simply because they may be cheaper. However, many non-certified farms do not buy organic seed because of the expense.

Buying certified organic seed is important, even if it is more expensive. When a farmer uses organic seed, they are supporting organic seed farms that do not use synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. And, certified organic seeds are always GMO-free.

If a farmer does not use certified organic seed, ask if they use GMO seeds and where they buy their seeds. If a seed is "Roundup Ready®" it is genetically modified to enable the plant to tolerate the glyphosate-based Roundup herbicide. Other common GMO traits include insect and virus resistance. Some seed companies have signed the "Safe Seed Pledge," which means they have vowed to never knowingly buy, sell, or trade genetically modified seeds or plants. You can find a list of these seed companies at [COUNCILFORRESPONSIBLEGENETICS.ORG](http://COUNCILFORRESPONSIBLEGENETICS.ORG).

## HYDROPONIC (SOIL-LESS) OR GROWN IN NUTRIENT RICH SOIL?

Organic agriculture is a boon to the environment because it can nurture soil health. Healthy soil supports water use efficiency, crop fertility, pest and disease suppression, carbon sequestration and a whole host of other benefits.

Crops grown in healthy soil are the most nutritious and delicious because organic matter makes nutrients in soil more available. Organic agriculture is founded on the process of capturing organic matter in the soil to foster soil fertility. This process also reverses climate change by capturing carbon from the atmosphere and storing it in the soil. The organic practices of cover cropping, composting, and mulching create healthier soils and therefore healthier crops and more nutritious produce.

Some growers choose to use soil-less hydroponic (aka container growing) or aquaponic systems that principally rely on liquid fertilizer solutions in an indoor growing environment that does nothing to support soil health. While these systems may have a place in urban or dryland agriculture, they are not organic.



## DO YOU USE OMRI-APPROVED PRODUCTS?

OMRI stands for Organic Materials Review Institute. Farming products that bear the OMRI logo are authorized for use under the National Organic Program's standards. Most farmers, certified organic or not, know about OMRI.

If a farmer has not heard of OMRI, then this is likely a signal that the farmer's practices are not really aligned with the organic standards. You can check whether any product used by a farmer is OMRI approved by looking it up yourself online at [OMRI.ORG/OMRI-LISTS](https://www.omri.org/omri-lists).

## HOW DO YOU CONTROL PESTS?

Biodiversity and soil health are essential to organic farming. They are the bedrock of pest control.

Proper plant spacing, crop rotations and management practices that support soil health all help in the control of pests. So does installing wildlife corridors and encouraging the development of areas rich in pollinator-friendly plants to attract beneficial insects that prey on a variety of pests. Beneficial vertebrates, such as birds and bats, can also be encouraged by providing habitat and housing near farm fields. Even predators, such as coyotes, foxes, and snakes, can be a valuable part of the farm ecosystem as rodent-pest controllers. In addition, physical barriers, such as light-weight fabric "remay," are often used by organic farmers to thwart insect pests.

There are organic-approved pest control products commercially available. If a farmer is using these, you can ask for the product's name and if it is OMRI listed.

## HOW DO YOU CONTROL WEEDS?

There are a variety of approaches used by organic farmers to control or suppress weeds.

The goal in organic agriculture is to control weeds, not to eradicate them. Organic farmers tolerate some weeds, as long as crop yield is not threatened. Organic strategies used to control weeds include using cover crops, mulch, cultivation (tilling), and hand weeding (in smaller operations). If plastic film is used as a mulch, it must be removed at the end of the season and discarded at the end of its usable life. There are no "biodegradable" plastic mulches approved for use in organic agriculture.

## HOW DO YOU MANAGE DISEASES?

A healthy soil that is rich in organic matter will grow healthy plants that are more likely to resist diseases.

Prevention is the key in organic management. You could ask non-certified farmers if they use any "fungicides."

Ask the farmer how he or she manages plant disease, and listen to hear whether crop rotations, disease resistant cultivars, and the use of cover crops are part of their management strategy. The best organic farmers grow many different crops, so that if disease pressure is high, it only affects one of the many crops that are grown. High crop diversity allows organic farmers to be more resilient if disease wipes out a certain crop.

There are some organic-approved products for the control of fungal diseases such as blight in potatoes and tomatoes. If the farmer is using these, ask for the product names and if they are OMRI approved. Commonly used organic fungicides are copper and sulfur based products.

## WHAT KIND OF FERTILIZER DO YOU USE?

You can also ask what kind of fertilizers the farmer uses—no synthetic fertilizers or sewage sludge should be used. Certified organic farmers primarily depend on compost and incorporating cover crops and other organic matter into the soil.

If the farmer uses raw manure for fertility, ask when it was applied. The organic rules specify that, in order to avoid potential *E. coli* contamination, raw manure must be applied at least three months before harvest of crops that are above the soil, such as peas, beans, tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants, or at least six months before the harvest of crops that are on, or in, the soil, such as root vegetables, lettuce, and other greens. If you're at a farmers market in the spring or summer and the grower says they use raw manure, the best answer in response to the timing question would be, "I apply manure to my fields in the fall." While treated municipal sewage sludge is a common fertilizer used on large conventional farms, it is not allowed to be used on any certified organic farm.

Other common organic fertilizers include fish emulsion, seaweed fertilizers, pelleted chicken manure, composted manures, and soybean meal. All inputs, including livestock manures, should be from certified organic sources to avoid contamination with antibiotics, dewormers, and persistent herbicides.

# 3 HOW WAS IT RAISED?

## HOW DO YOU MANAGE YOUR LIVESTOCK?

Under the federal organic standards, all livestock are required to have access to the outdoors. Confinement systems (where the animals are kept continuously in buildings) are prohibited, except in the case of weather extremes or health concerns.

If a farm claims that their chickens or turkeys (meat birds or laying hens) are “pastured” ask them if they are using mobile coops, which is the best approach to pasturing poultry. However, even if not in a mobile coop, small flocks that live in a fixed house may still roam widely.

It is important to ask how often the chickens are rotated onto fresh ground. How large the pasture is and whether the birds are moved to other pastures are also important factors in determining the quality of the poultry husbandry. If an area is overused, vegetation will be stripped and the birds’ outdoor area will become bare ground quickly. This is problematic because birds will not find as many invertebrates to eat and their manure will likely be too concentrated to be beneficial to the pasture.

Remember that even when poultry is raised on pasture, they still must be fed supplemental feeds, which often include grains such as soy or corn. If the birds’ diet is particularly important to you, you can ask what makes up the bulk of their feed and whether it is certified organic. Some producers will advertise “soy-free” poultry products, which indicates that the birds were not fed soy beans or meal.

For cattle, whether beef or dairy, ask the producer how many acres of pasture they have per animal. One cow, or less, per acre is a good rule of thumb.

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY GRASS-FED, 100% GRASS, OR GRASS-FINISHED?

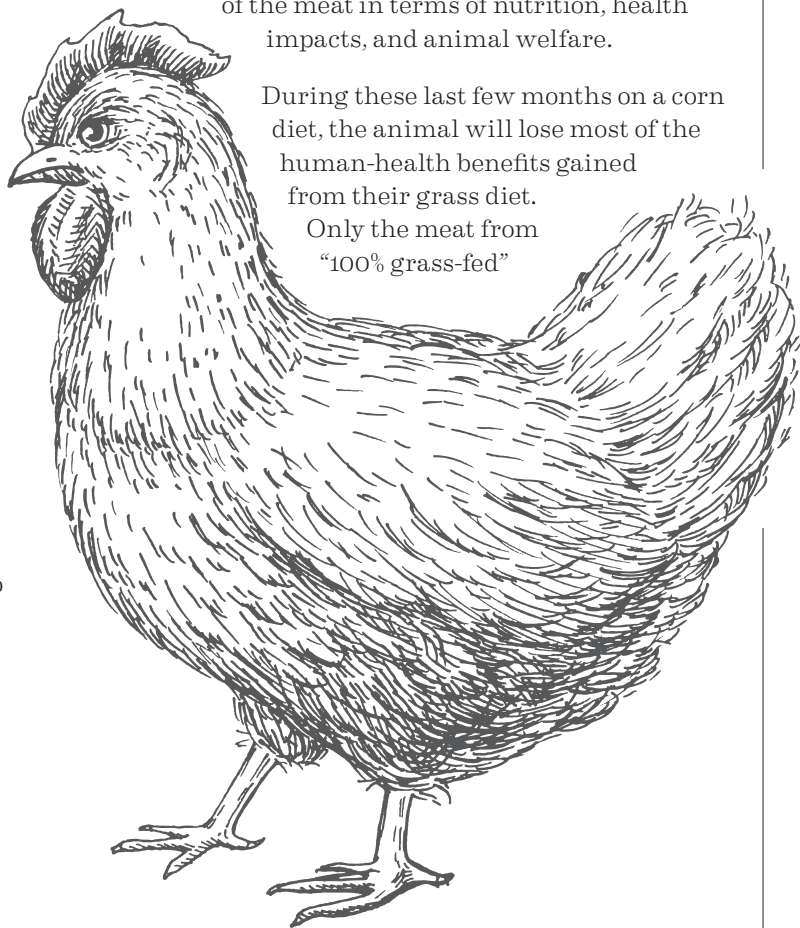
Some farmers say their beef cattle are “grass-fed.” This often means the animal was on pasture for

most of its life, but was fed corn in a feedlot during the last few months before slaughter.

This strategy speeds up weight gain, resulting in more meat to be sold while still maintaining a “grass-fed” label. While finishing cattle in a feedlot on grain may result in greater profit, it can reduce the quality of the meat in terms of nutrition, health impacts, and animal welfare.

During these last few months on a corn diet, the animal will lose most of the human-health benefits gained from their grass diet.

Only the meat from “100% grass-fed”



or “grass-finished” animals will have optimum omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acid ratios of 4:1, or even as low as 2:1. Meat from grass-fed animals that are also grass-finished will contain greater amounts of vitamins, minerals and trace minerals, and the fat may be orange in color due to the presence of beta-carotene.

However, some people prefer corn-finished beef because of the different taste and marbling of fat. There are high-integrity beef producers who finish their cattle with grain for this reason. They will tell you that their

cows are never in confined feedlots and that they have had access to pasture for their entire lives. Having an informed conversation with the farmer will enable you to differentiate how your meat is produced and how well the animals are cared for.

If a sign says “100% grass-fed,” that should be equivalent to “grass-finished.” A grass-finished animal is grass-fed over the course of its entire life.

Remember to ask if any synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides are used on the grass. An animal product is not organic if the feed it consumed was not organic.

“Pasture-raised” when used to describe how beef cattle are managed is likely to mean that the animals were given access to pasture but were probably also fed grain (i.e., corn and soy), and were most likely grain-finished.

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY PASTURE-RAISED AND FREE-RANGE?

The term “grass-fed” refers to what an animal eats—grass—while “pasture-raised” refers to where it eats—on a pasture.

“Grass-fed” refers to beef, lamb and sometimes goat, because these animals eat grass. “Pasture-raised” often refers to poultry and pork, because chickens, turkeys and hogs cannot survive on grass alone.

It is hard to find 100% pasture-raised pork, especially in northern climates. Ask the farmer how long their pastured animals are outside during the year. Seven to eight months in northern regions, and 10-12 months in warmer areas, is a good rule of thumb. Because hogs must be given some kind of supplemental feed, you may want to ask what else the hogs are fed. Often it is a general pelleted “pig feed” that may not be organic.

Poultry products are often labeled “free-range,” but this term can be misleading. Large flocks of “free-range” chickens are typically raised in fixed barns. . But large flocks of “free-range” chickens are typically raised in barns. They are not confined to cages in the barns, so they are free-ranging inside the barn, often with limited access to the outdoors. Few of these “free-range” birds actually venture outside of their large buildings. Indoor conditions vary; overcrowding and lack of perches are common.

Pastured poultry are managed on pasture, either in fixed

barns or in housing that is moved frequently, like mobile coops or “chicken tractors.” Mobile housing allows the birds access to fresh ground, preventing its overuse. This guarantees a constant supply of seeds, worms, bugs, and vegetation. Birds allowed to eat this more natural and diverse diet produce more nutrient-dense eggs and meat. With frequent rotation, the poultry manure is a source of pasture fertility, rather than a pollutant.

Silvopasture, the practice of combining forestry and grazing animals in a mutually beneficial way, is another legitimate way to raise healthy livestock outdoors.

Some farmers will happily show you photos of their pastured-animals, and asking appropriate questions like, “How often do you rotate your animals to new pasture?” will help make their practices clear.

## WHAT KIND OF FEED DO YOU GIVE YOUR CHICKENS?

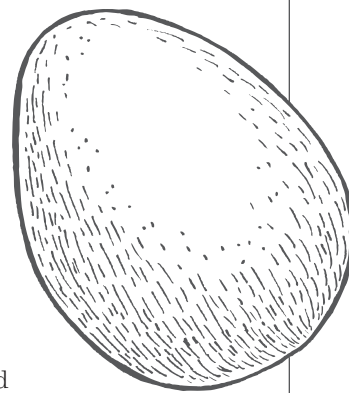
Many local farmers rotate their birds on quality pasture. But experts in this field state that, even in the summer, up to 85% of the feed consumed by pastured chickens comes from stored grains, seeds, and legumes.

In the winter months, often 100% of the chicken feed is stored feed. It is important to ask the farmer what kind of feed they give to their chickens and to ask its organic status or other background. The best poultry feed is both locally grown and certified organic (or grown with organic practices).

If a farmer is not feeding certified organic grain to their poultry, 85-100% of what the animals are eating is very likely to be from GMO corn or soy and therefore contaminated with herbicide residues. Even if a farmer says they buy non-GMO feed, this feed is very likely grown with synthetic pesticides. Non-GMO is not organic.

All certified organic feed is GMO-free and free of synthetic pesticides.

Very few farms produce all of their own livestock feed, but some do, and it is possible that on such a farm the homegrown feed will be produced in the true spirit of organic without toxic agrichemicals.



## HOW DO YOU MANAGE ANIMAL HEALTH?

Even if the feed that animals are consuming is certified organic, you may want to know how the farmer handles the medical needs of their livestock. Certified organic production bans most veterinary medicines as well as the use of antibiotics.

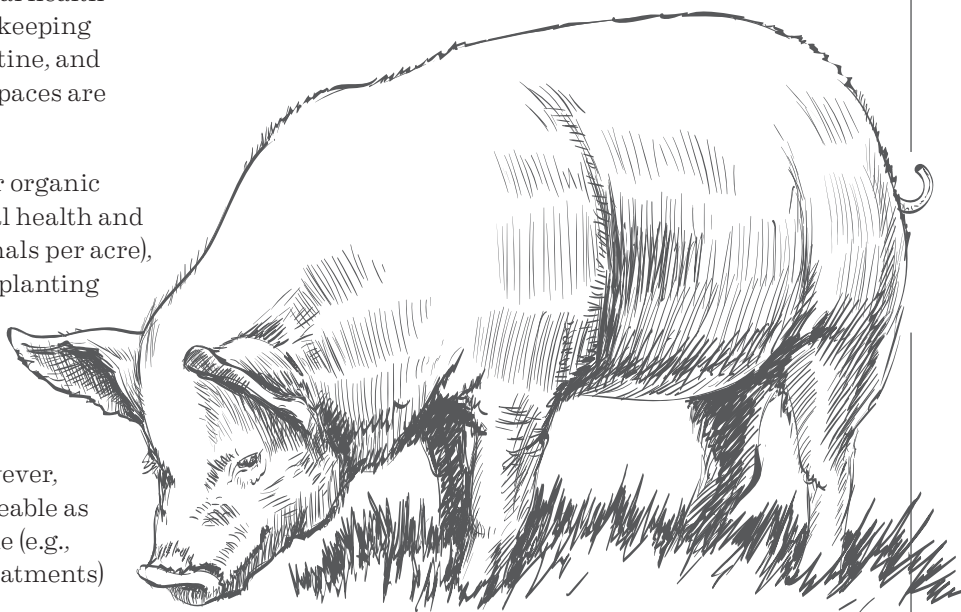
Organic farmers have to prevent disease, instead of depending on drugs. Minimizing exposure to diseases and parasites is necessary for optimal animal health and well-being. Maintaining a closed herd, keeping sick or newly purchased animals in quarantine, and proper sanitation of equipment and living spaces are recommended practices.

Proper grazing management is essential for organic parasite control, because it enhances animal health and nutrition. A sustainable stocking rate (animals per acre), moving animals to new pasture often, and planting different types of grasses and legumes in the pasture are helpful practices to break the life cycles of parasites.

There are a number of organic-approved alternative remedies to treat livestock. However, non-certified farmers may not be knowledgeable as to which alternative therapies are acceptable (e.g., aspirin, herbal remedies, or chiropractic treatments) under the National Organic Standards.

A few parasiticides, such as moxidectin and fenbenzadole, are allowed for organic production if proper withholding times are used. If a farmer says they use parasiticides, ask them if the ones they use are allowed under the organic standards and if they are abiding by the required withholding periods.

Of course, if an organic animal's life is threatened, otherwise prohibited drugs may be used, but the farmer must then remove that treated animal from organic production.



# 4 SEE FOR YOURSELF

## CAN I VISIT YOUR FARM?

Most local farmers welcome visitors and are proud of their farms. Many even hold annual open houses. When a farm is not certified by a third-party organization, visiting is the best way to verify that the farm is operating with integrity.

Keep in mind that the summer is a very busy time for farmers, so a visit may have to be scheduled appropriately. Offering to weed or work alongside the farmer during the visit might be appreciated, especially if you have some experience in this.

Some farms even offer work-for-produce exchanges, which is a great way to become more knowledgeable about a farm's practices and see how your food is grown.

Your local farmers want you to know that they are caring for the land and animals in a way you can feel good about and that provides the highest quality, most delicious food. When you engage farmers in conversation about their farming practices, you will learn a lot and, in turn, they will gain a loyal customer, both of you building a good food community together!



# NATURAL! NO SPRAY! SUSTAINABLE!

## A DO-IT-YOURSELF POCKET GUIDE TO NON-CERTIFIED “ORGANIC” FOOD

HELPING YOU ASK THE RIGHT  
QUESTIONS AT THE FARMERS  
MARKET.



CORNUCOPIA  
INSTITUTE

# 1

IS IT LOCAL?

### WHO GREW THIS FOOD? WHERE WAS IT GROWN?

You are looking for an answer like “we grew this food on our farm down the road.” This helps you steer clear of re-sellers who sell mostly conventional produce that they bought at wholesale.

### WHAT IS IN SEASON RIGHT NOW?

If a stand displays vegetables or fruit that are not in season, they may not be locally grown, especially if there are a wide variety of unseasonable items.

# 2

HOW WAS IT  
GROWN?

### IS YOUR FARM CERTIFIED ORGANIC?

Buying local AND certified organic should be your first choice. Your patronage rewards farmers who have made the extra investment in certification to support the overall organic community.

### IF NOT CERTIFIED, HOW WAS THIS FOOD GROWN?

If a farm is not certified organic, then an inspector is not checking to verify that a farm’s “no-spray,” “chemical-free,” “natural,” or “grown using organic methods” claims are true.

### HOW DO YOU CONTROL PESTS, WEEDS & DISEASES?

Biodiversity and soil health are essential parts of organic farming, they are the bedrock of pest and disease control. Organic weed control strategies include cover crops, mulching, cultivation, and/or hand weeding.

### WHAT KIND OF FERTILIZER DO YOU USE?

Certified organic farmers primarily depend on compost and incorporating cover crops and other organic matter into the soil for fertility. No synthetic fertilizer should be used.

# 3

HOW WAS IT  
RAISED?

### HOW DO YOU MANAGE YOUR LIVESTOCK?

Organic rules require that livestock have access to the outdoors. For chickens, ask if they are moved to new grass regularly. For cattle, ask how many animals per acre—one cow per acre is a good rule of thumb.

### WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY GRASS-FED, 100% GRASS, OR GRASS-FINISHED?

Typically, beef cattle start their lives on grass and end them in a feedlot on grain. For the most healthy fatty-acid ratio (and best animal welfare) ask if the cows were grass finished, or 100% grass-fed.

### WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY PASTURE-RAISED OR FREE-RANGE?

Pasture-raised poultry and pork likely means that the animals are outside for most of the year. However, “free-range” often refers to chickens living indoors, just not in cages.

### WHAT KIND OF FEED DO YOU GIVE YOUR CHICKENS?

If a farmer is not feeding certified organic feed to their poultry, 85% or more of what the animals are eating is likely GMO and contaminated with herbicide residues.

# 4

SEE FOR  
YOURSELF

### CAN I VISIT YOUR FARM?

If a farm is not certified organic, visiting is the best way to verify that the farm is operating with integrity. Ask the farmer if they host an open house day when visitors are welcome.

#### THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

P.O. Box 126 • Cornucopia, WI 54827

TEL: 608-625-2000

[cornucopia.org](http://cornucopia.org)

THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE is engaged in research and educational activities supporting the ecological principles and economic wisdom underlying sustainable and organic agriculture. Through research and investigations on agricultural and food issues, The Cornucopia Institute provides needed information to family farmers, consumers, stakeholders involved in the good food movement, and the media.