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ORGANIC EVOLUTION

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Buying organic produce used to require near-religious dedication.

Co-op groceries, natural food stores and roadside farm stands were oases of sustainably grown fruit and veggie purchases 20 years ago.

But go into just about any supermarket these days, including the produce aisle at many Wal-Marts and Costcos, and organic produce offerings are plentiful. The goods might even have their own corner, such as the vegetables at Nob Hill in Pacific Grove.

"We have 39 organic varieties," a big sign boasts. "Organically grown, all in harmony with nature's ecology."

The organic farming movement is far removed from the fringe where it started: From tiny farms to huge corporations, it's big business.

Sales of organic products, ranging from produce to gummy bears to beer, have increased by 20 percent nationwide each year since 1990 and account for 2 percent of all food and beverages sales nationally, according to the Organic Trade Association.

The value of organic produce grown in Monterey County increased from \$9.1 million in 1991 to \$134 million in 2004, according to the Agricultural Commissioner's Office. If organic produce was categorized as a crop, it would be the eighth-most valuable item grown here, just behind grapes and ahead of spring mix.

But just what does organic mean?

Quite literally, it's defined in a 400-page U.S. Department of Agriculture document, spelling out organic practices for "asparagus to zucchini and (from) farm to table," said Bob Scrowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz.

Simply put, organic labeling tells you that a product's ingredients or the product itself has been grown and produced in an environmentally friendly way.

Key organic farming practices include using only pesticides and fertilizers made from materials that are nontoxic and naturally occurring in the environment, keeping detailed records of products that touch one's fields, and maintaining and replenishing soil through nonchemical means.

The turning point for the organic movement, say growers and organic researchers, was when these practices were defined by the passage of the Organic Foods Production Act in 1990. The act set national organic standards, now certified by USDA seals you find on boxes and packaging.

Before that time, organic meant all kinds of things to all kinds of growers, fragmented across the country.

"In the late '70s, there were some old guys that came by and said, 'It's organic. I just used a little Round Up,'" said Mark Marino, farm manager for San Juan Bautista-based, all-organic Earthbound Farm, laughing. "But I mean, what were they supposed to know? There weren't any guidelines."

Standardizing organic produce was as important for the farmers as it was for organic food processors, Scrowcroft said.

"They could begin to contemplate buying tomatoes from five different states and could offer organic tomato sauce,"

Scrowcroft said. "It brought a whole new dimension to the production community."

Conformity gave the one-time fringe movement an economy of scale, making it a much more viable -- and profitable -- option for all parties involved, he said.

But it hasn't happen overnight: Growers, for example, must rest a field where synthetic fertilizers and pesticides have been used for three years before being certified to grow organically on the same land, he said.

"There is a lot of risk in those three years," Lauritzen said.

But with many conventional growers tapping into the growing organic market, organic practices have influenced several ancillary changes in conventional growing, including the move away from traditional, broad-spectrum pesticides and towards "softer, more environmentally friendly" materials, Lauritzen said.

The use of cover crops, often grown on fields in wintertime to prevent soil erosion and encourage the growth of rich nutrients, is another technique used by organic growers that many conventional farmers now use.

"A lot of people have this vision that it's organic and conventional, and they are wildly different," Lauritzen said, "but there is a lot in between."

And while some conventional farmers may be tapping into organic technique, many of the markets dominated by the conventional growers are increasingly open and filling with organic produce.

Earthbound Farm is a great example: The company started as a two-and-a-half-acre farm in Carmel Valley in 1984, with founders Drew and Myra Goodman selling their organic raspberries at a roadside stand.

Earthbound is now the largest grower and shipper of organic produce in North America.

"We've proven that organic farming can be viable on a large scale," Marino said, "and by opening up the markets like Costco, Wal-Mart, Safe-way, etc., that just makes the pot bigger for everyone."

Some key moments in organic farming 1974: First regulation defining "organic" passed in Oregon 1979: First organic law passed in California 1987: Eco-Farm Conference comes to Asilomar 1989: Alar scare brings attention to pesticide use in farming 1990: Farm Bill includes Organic Foods Production Act, defining federal organic standards • Establishment of the National Organic Standards Board • Passage of the Organic Foods Production Act • Passage of the California Organic Foods Act 2002: Organic Foods Production Act implemented 2004: Organic crops grown on more than 14,000 acres in Monterey County worth \$134 million 2007: Next Farm Bill to go before Congress

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