OF

Introduction

OF is an ecological management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. This system is based on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance biological harmony. Organic farmers fertilize and build healthy soils by using compost, and other biologically based soil modifications. This produces healthy plants which are better able to resist disease and insect predation. Organic foods, as opposed to food grown with chemical fertilizers, are minimally processed to maintain the integrity of the food without artificial ingredients, preservatives or irradiation. This means that OF systems do not use toxic chemical pesticides or fertilizers.

Organic Pest Control

Organic farmers also rely on a diverse population of soil organisms, insects, birds, and other organisms to keep pest problems in check. When the pest populations get out of balance, growers implement a variety of strategies including the use of insect predators, mating disruption, traps, and barriers. Finally, as a last resort, botanical, and other non-toxic pesticides may be applied under strict conditions. As to weed problems, they are controlled through increased cultivation, as well as cover crops, mulches, crop rotation, and even flame weeding.

Higher Prices and Higher Quality

Generally, organic foods cost more than conventional foods. The reason is because the prices for organic foods reflect many of the same costs as conventional foods in terms of growing, harvesting, transportation, and storage, but there are added costs as well. Organically produced foods must meet stricter regulations so the process is often more labor and management intensive, which costs more.

Also, the farms tend to be on a smaller scale. Some industry watchers believe that if all the indirect costs of conventional food production, including cleanup of polluted water, replacement of eroded soils, and the costs of health care for farmers and their workers were factored into the price of conventional food, organic foods would cost the same, or more likely be cheaper.

USDA Standards

Organic farmers follow a set of strict standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Essentially, the organic standards offer a national definition for the term “organic.” The standards also state that all agricultural products labeled organic must originate from farms or handling operations certified by a state or private agency accredited by the USDA. Organic certification is a complicated process that can take up to three years to complete. Farms and handling operations that sell less than $5,000.00 worth of organic agricultural products are exempt from certification. The standards detail the methods, practices, and substances that can be used in producing organic crops and livestock. They establish clear organic labeling criteria, and specifically prohibit the use of genetic engineering methods, ionizing radiation, and sewage sludge for fertilization.

Also, for products to carry the label “Made with Organic Ingredients,” at least 70% of their ingredients must be organic. Furthermore, the standards provide information for consumers by requiring manufacturers to state the exact percentage of organic ingredients on the chief display panel of the product.

OF as a Business

There are only 31,000 major farms in the U.S. that do not use chemical fertilizers or pesticides. However, OF not only results in tastier crops, but also makes crops more profitable. For example, organic wheat can sell for up to seventy cents more per bushel than wheat grown with chemical pesticides

Before DDT—the first widely used synthetic pesticide—hit the market in 1946, American farmers lost about a third of their crops each year to insects, weeds, and disease. Today, farmers spend more than $4 billion each year on pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides and yet they still lose the same one-third of their crops. In September of 1989, the National Academy of Sciences’ Board on Agriculture released a report stating that farmers who use little or no chemicals are usually just as productive as those who do spend their money to use chemicals.

Conclusion

The demand for organic foods is growing at a rapid pace. Organic foods can be found at natural food stores, health food sections, and produce departments of supermarkets, and at farmers’ markets. Many restaurant chefs across the country are using organic produce because they desire its superior quality and taste. Organic food is also gaining acceptance on a worldwide basis, with nations like Japan and Germany becoming important organic food markets (www.ofrf.org). Organic foods may be more expensive that non-organic offerings, but the combination of quality, taste, and safety make them a priority for many.