

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What does certified organic actually mean?

Organic is a labeling term that indicates that all agricultural products have been produced through approved methods. These methods integrate cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity (USDA). Organic is an environmentally and animal-friendly way of producing and processing food. **Certified** organic means that an independent third-party agent has verified that the producer is using organic methods. The USDA accredits certifying agents, like MOFGA Certification Services LLC, to ensure that all certified organic producers are following the national standards. Here is an overview of the organic principles:

- Crops- Must improve or maintain soil, use natural sources of fertility, only be grown from organic seeds and use crop rotation to help control pests, weeds, and diseases.
- Livestock- Must receive 100% organic feed, have access to the outdoors and be able to exhibit natural behavior, and healthcare is focused on preventative measures.
- Processors- Must maintain organic integrity through to the finished product, use specific cleaners and sanitizers and must be able to produce an audit trail.
- Synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetic engineering (GMO) may not be used in any aspect of organic production. Added antibiotics and growth hormones are not used in organic meat production.

* **Local and organic are not the same.** "Local food" refers only to where your food is produced; organic refers to how. Local and organic are better together!

2. Why are there different types of organic labels?

Some certified organic producers choose to use the USDA Organic label, some use the MOFGA Certified Organic label, and some use both! Using any kind of organic label is optional, and the choice may depend on which label customers recognize. However, if a product is labeled certified organic, it must identify the certifier and should do so under the company name.

3. How does organic relate to other types of labels?

There are many different labels on the market; some are verified, but most are not.

- The "natural" label- is regulated by the USDA, but only when used on meat, poultry and egg products. In this case no standards apply to the farm; they apply only to the processing of the product.
- "Grass-fed" and "free-range" labels are regulated by the USDA and apply only to very specific aspects of animal production.
- "Cage-free", "pasture-raised", and "sustainably grown" labels are not currently regulated or verified labels.

Whenever you see these or other labels ask for more information: what do they mean, how are they verified, and is an independent third party involved? Only organic certification looks at the entire process from farm to shelf!

4. Why do producers choose to certify?

Organic certification is required legally for any farm grossing more than \$5,000 annually from sales of organic items. Regardless of gross sales, certification is also required for any

farm that supplies a food producer or processor marketing as organic. Farmers grossing \$5,000 or less annually can forego certification, but must still adhere to organic practices, and they cannot say they are certified.

The ability to use the word “organic” is not the only reason farmers choose to certify. When organic farmers in Maine were asked why they certify, they discussed the importance of being part of a larger movement, of how certification supports their philosophy and their values for high quality products, and the importance of stewardship of the earth.

5. Isn't organic certification expensive?

This is a common misconception and many certified organic farmers in Maine will tell you this is not true. Annual certification fees are based on gross sales of organic products, meaning different tiers exist for different producers. For example, a producer who makes \$10,000 in annual sales, but less than \$25,000 will pay \$725 for certification, whereas a producer who makes at least \$200,000 in sales, but less than \$300,000 will pay \$1,450.

Furthermore, the federal government reimburses producers **75%** of their certification fee. This funding is part of the federal Farm Bill and most certified organic producers do take advantage of the rebate.

6. Why does organic food cost more?

Organic food can cost, on average, 20 to 30% more than conventional food, according to the USDA Economic Research Service. However, this data is based on information from grocery stores, not buying directly from local farmers. Often, price premiums for organic food are lower when you buy direct.

When organic food does cost more, it is often because it is more expensive to produce: fewer federal subsidies are available to organic growers, organic production can be more labor intensive, and true environmental stewardship does have monetary value and cost. Buyers will find the highest price premiums on organic proteins and dairy, in part due to the high costs of organic grain. Fresh, organic produce usually has the lowest price premium of all organic food. The organic price premium for processed food can vary from 20 to 50%, largely depending on the number of ingredients and their availability.

7. How can I find certified organic products?

MOFGA can help with this in many ways! If you are interested in buying directly from producers you can use our online “yellow pepper” search tool at www.mofgacertification.org to search for organic food by type (apple, eggs, broccoli, etc.), location, farm name, or even by markets served (wholesale, farmers market, natural food store, restaurant, etc.). You can also contact Heather Omand at MOFGA directly for assistance, or grab a copy of our Organic Maine! publication (included in your packet).

If you prefer to work with your existing distributors, let them know that you are serious about sourcing organic products and that you would like those products to be local too. You will receive the best prices and service and will build amazing relationships if you work with farmers directly, but this may not be possible for everyone.