

Organic gardening is better

Conversations about organic gardening often devolve to a single question – “Is organic worth the increased price?” This is a reasonable query, as there is generally a higher cost with organic production.



Some voices insist that there are many benefits for both human and environmental health, while others claim there are none. Those skeptics state that even the most obvious advantage, decreased exposure to pesticides, is of minimal value. Their reasoning is: if pesticides are applied correctly and produce is washed before eating, they should pose no danger. (The assumptions here are that pesticides are applied correctly and that produce is washed before serving.)

This kind of dispute can be confusing to the intrepid gardener. Despite the fact that many people have a somewhat casual approach to gardening, a number of us have a “gut feeling” that organic is somehow better, with higher levels of nutrition and lower levels of synthetic toxins. As a result, we try to follow organic principles, at least in part.

This can be challenging, since there are fewer quick fixes for problems that may arise. Much of the work in organic horticulture is done before a single seed is placed in the ground; creating a healthy soil, well balanced in fertility, tilth, and insects (helpful and pestilential). Compost is a key source of plant nutrients, and organic, fertilizers are added as necessary. Pest control is done more on an as-needed basis than most conventional systems.

The controversy extends to the scientific community. Research results vary widely. Some studies conclude that benefits, if any, are minimal. Others are far more positive. No wonder it is possible to get scientific data to support either side of the argument!

So much research has produced mixed results that some researchers are now comparing the studies. They are evaluating data on nutritional and public health aspects, like antioxidants, pesticide residues and incidents of heavy metal contamination. Even meta-analyses (comparison

studies) can reach differing conclusions, but a recent article in the British Journal of Nutrition has come forcefully on the side of organic produce.

Researchers from Britain, the United States, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, France and Switzerland rigorously examined 343 scientific publications comparing organically and conventionally produced food. The goal was to see whether the data led to a definitive conclusion.

They found no significant differences in protein between the two methods, but organic produced food frequently had higher levels of antioxidant compounds. These chemicals appear to be protective against some chronic diseases, benefit cardiac health, and possibly diminish cardiac risk.

Not surprisingly, organic food contained fewer pesticide residues, since conventional insecticides, herbicides or fungicides are prohibited. In an organic garden, insects are controlled mechanically and biologically, with acceptable insecticides used as a last resort. Weeds and plant diseases are treated the same way.

Finally, they found that there were lower levels of the toxic heavy metal, cadmium.

It appears there are significant benefits to food produced organically. In other words, the answer to the question above is “Yes, I think so.”

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