Understanding Organics

It's hard to believe that just a few short years ago "going organic" was a novel niche market that meant buying pesticide-free fruit and vegetables. Times have changed though and products—from baby clothes to mattresses, to pet food and beauty creams—are all touting themselves as "natural" or "organic." If you're confused about whether buying organic is all it's cracked up to be, you're not alone. The answer to this debate is not cut and dry and depends on what you're buying. Understanding the various terms companies use and the criteria required for organic certification can help you distinguish reality from hype so you can make the best decisions for your family and your wallet.

What is Organic?

Products labelled "certified organic" must be made from organically grown or raised components. Organic farming is guided by very strict rules and codes of conduct that promote environmental sustainability by restricting the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, certain antibiotics and veterinary medicines as well as genetically modified seed and crops. The specifics are outlined in greater detail by the Government of Canada and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Until recently products could be marketed as "organic" without meeting specific requirements. With only voluntary standards, many companies jumped on the organic bandwagon without necessarily having followed the strict rules of organic farming. The introduction of organic product guidelines and regulations has made it much easier for consumers purchasing organic. In Canada, organic products are marked with a bi-lingual "Canada Organic" seal from an accredited certification body. The Canadian and U.S. standards are essentially the same, and the two countries have an agreement to honour each other's certification. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency lists both Canadian and international organic certification organizations.

Buyer Beware

While the USDA allows their organic logo on any agricultural product, including food, fibre and personal products that are comprised of at least 95 per cent organic material, the laws are less clear in Canada. Some of the Canadian rules referring more generally to organic agricultural "products" without specifying fibres and personal products; and other literature suggesting that these rules only apply to organic food items.

Regardless, cosmetic products, including shampoos, deodorants, face creams, etc., can—and often do—legally use the word "organic" as part of their company or product name even if the product is not organic. They may also describe the product as being "made with organic ingredients" if it contains 70 per cent or more of organic material.

Your best defence is to dig a little deeper, read the label and ask the seller lots of questions. Because synthetic preservatives lengthen the shelf life of many personal hygiene products, it can be difficult to find a 95 per cent organically derived face cream or shampoo.

Fabrics such as organic cotton, hemp and bamboo are also becoming more and more common as "sustainable" design grows in popularity and demand. While looking for an organic seal or certification can help you determine fact from fiction in most cases, it becomes a little trickier to determine in items that contain multiple kinds of fabric. For example, a company might tout its mattress as being covered in organic cotton, but the product may still contain a non-organic base. Again, it's important to ask lots of questions around certification and other materials used in production and then decide where your priorities lay.

Take Your Pick: Strategic Organic Shopping

Although, when given the choice, most of us would agree that "less is more" where pesticides are concerned, an entirely organic diet can be very expensive and it may not be financially feasible to eat all organic all of the time.

If you need to watch your wallet, know that certain foods are more susceptible to absorbing the pesticides they're treated with. The thin, edible skins found on peaches, apples, berries, lettuce, tomatoes and bell

peppers can absorb higher levels of pesticides used. So buying organic where these items are concerned will give you more bang for your pesticide-free buck. Thick-skinned produce like bananas, pineapple, cauliflower, mangos, cabbage, kiwi and avocados tend to contain fewer pesticides so budget-conscious consumers may prefer to save some money by buying conventional versions of this produce. If you are buying non-organic fruits and veggies, you can reduce pesticide exposure by taking a little extra time to thoroughly peel, scrub and trim them before eating.

Most people suggest that the real place to splurge on organics is when it comes to meat and dairy products such as milk, eggs and cheese as the result is often a tastier, richer dining experience. Note, however, that larger-scale dairies and meat producers are now also providing consumers with “hormone free” and “free range” options that might not be certified organic but expand your options and may provide you with what you’re looking for at a more economic price.

Like any growing fad, you need to be careful as a consumer. Don’t confuse words like “all-natural” and “organic ingredients” for a certified organic product. Look for government issued labels, visit company websites and talk to salespeople with an inquisitive mind and a cautious ear. Staying aware and informed and doing your research will help you decipher organic hype from reality and make the best decision for you and your family.