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ORGANIC FOODS INCREASE

With consumers' focus increasingly turned toward health and food safety, organic food production is growing in popularity with the potential to become increasingly profitable in coming years.

In the United States, organic food production makes up less than 2 percent of today's market. That niche, however, is worth about \$7 billion and has been growing yearly by 20 percent for the last 20 years.

In order to be advertised as organic foods, products must meet national standards dictated in November 2002 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Some of these standards are more difficult to meet than others. For example, though specific regulations exist about inputs for crops, many animal producers already meet most organic requirements, particularly if their animals graze on free range.

If you are a small farmer with less than 500 acres, it is something to be thinking about. Current prices for soybeans are around \$12.00 per bushel with corn going for \$6.00 per bushel. Price is not, however, the only consideration. Those who are certified organic, cannot use any commercial fertilizers, any transgenic crops, and no synthetic pesticides of any kind. Thus, organic farming requires a great deal of interest in growing crops in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way. Basically, it is a lot of work, but for those who are doing it, it can be very satisfying.

A farmer cannot just start growing food organically. One of the requirements is that there be a three year period where the farmer grows organically but is not certified. At the end of the three years, certification is provided as long as they have met the requirements. Certification is done by a number of certifying agencies such as the OCIA association that is located in Lincoln.

Most of us have probably heard the horror stories about a friend of a friend that lives by an organic farmer whose weeds are just horrific. Not all organic farms are like that. As it is in conventional agriculture, there are certainly organic farmers who do not do well. However, those who are conscientious seem to do very well. I have certainly seen organic raised crops that were absolutely excellent. That is another reason for keeping the farm small so that management can be effective. In my opinion, the ridge plant system works the best when organic farming.

Many large food companies are showing an interest in organic production because of health and safety consumer priorities. Food safety issues such as mad cow disease have been catalysts in turning the consumer's focus more toward organic foods, especially in European meat markets. Other consumers seek organically grown foods in an effort to avoid foods containing pesticides. To meet consumer demands, increasing numbers of supermarkets are adding organic sections. Booths at farmers' markets often advertise if they produce pesticide-free foods.

Comprehensive studies show traces of pesticides in 40 percent to 50 percent of foods from conventional supermarkets, while pesticides appear in 10 percent to 15 percent of organic foods.



Randy Pryor, Extension Educator
University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension in Saline County
306 West 3rd Street, Wilber, NE 68465
Phone (402) 821-2151 • Fax (402) 821-3398 • e-mail: randy.pryor@unl.edu