

Consumers willing to pay more for locally grown apples

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A 2008 study found that organic apples represented 4.6% of total apple sales in the United States, up from 3.5% in 2007. In Vermont, apples have been the most important fruit crop for many years, playing an important role in the state's economy—so important, in fact, that apples were named the state's official fruit in 1999. Vermont apple growers, facing a host of challenges such as increasing production costs and intensifying competition from imported apples, are looking for ways to succeed in the emerging organic food market.

Qingbin Wang and Robert Parsons from the University of Vermont's Department of Community Development and Applied Economics and Junjie Sun from the U.S. Department of the Treasury collaborated on a research study to assess consumer valuation of "major apple attributes", especially "locally grown" and "organic," and to examine the differences in preferences between consumers who had purchased [organic food](#) and consumers who had not. The study, published in a recent issue of [HortScience](#), contains practical information that may help guide apple production and marketing decisions.

Of the nearly 64% of the survey respondents who said they had purchased organic food, the average household expenditure on organic food was \$69.30, or 19.9% of their average monthly food expense. "This data suggests that Vermont is likely one of the leading states in organic [food consumption](#) in the country", noted the team. Data also indicated that most organic food consumers purchased their organic products from supermarkets (66.9%), farmers' markets (51.9%), natural food stores

(50.2%) and food cooperatives (44%)—information that may be encouraging for small producers who are not able to sell their products through supermarkets because of quantity and other restrictions.

The research found "significant differences in preferences" between respondents who had purchased organic food and respondents who had not purchased organic food, but both groups showed a strong preference for local (Vermont) apples compared with apples from other regions. The survey results also indicated that many consumers, especially people who had purchased organic food, are willing to pay significantly more for organic apples produced locally and certified by the Northeast Organic Farming Association. "This is important information for both organic and conventional apple growers in Vermont, showing that if they market their apples as Vermont-grown, they may be able to sell them at higher prices", concluded the scientists.

More information: The complete study and abstract are available on the ASHS HortScience electronic journal web site:

hortsci.ashspublications.org/content/abstract/45/3/376

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