

# How to be smarter about buying organic

April 20 2018, by Debbie Carlson, Chicago Tribune

---

You see the labels out there—organic, cage-free, natural—but what does it all mean?

If you're trying to make better shopping choices for the environment by choosing "greener" or ethically made products, you're going to be bombarded by dozens of labels purporting to measure up to a certain standard, and probably charging more money for the goods.

But don't be fooled. Be an informed consumer by taking a few minutes to familiarize yourself with a few common terms and certifications, so you can avoid being "greenwashed."

\* Look for the USDA Organic [label](#). The U.S. Department of Agriculture certifies what food and fiber products meet federal regulations to be called organic and can carry the circular "USDA Organic" label.

This certification means they were grown and processed according to federal guidelines addressing, among many factors, soil quality, animal-raising practices and use of additives. Farmers can't apply synthetic pesticides or herbicides or use genetically modified seeds. No other "eco" label out there has federal regulations behind it, said Connie Karr, certification director at Oregon Tilth, a USDA-accredited certification organization that inspects farms to ensure regulatory compliance.

If you see terms like natural, cage-free or pasture-raised on a product without the USDA organic label, there are no strict guidelines. "Those

are claims that a company can make, but there's no federal regulation to them. (They) could mean a hundred different things to a hundred different people," Karr said.

Only 100 percent certified organic products get to display the USDA seal. If a packaged product says it is made with organic ingredients, that means at least 70 percent of those ingredients are organically produced and the rest are made without prohibited practices. These won't have the USDA seal, but they must identify the USDA-accredited certifier.

Lewis Goldstein, vice president of brand at Organic Valley, a farmer-owned cooperative, said there's been some confusion about "organic" and "non-GMO" labels. Organic is always non-GMO, he said. Products raised conventionally can say they have non-GMO ingredients, but there are no federal certifications or inspections required for non-GMO goods.

Organic certification is an expensive and long process for farmers, and those costs are passed on to consumers, which is why organic commands a premium price. It's also why many third-party labels popped up in recent years—trying to get on the trend while bypassing federal regulations.

When looking at these third-party labels that don't include USDA certification, consumers should research what the certifications mean, said Ioannis Kareklas, assistant professor of marketing at the University at Albany, who co-edited the 2017 book "Deciphering Organic Foods" and works with farmers.

"As we get more ... labels, you have to follow the trail and figure out who's providing the certifications, what are their motivations and their financial incentive. In some cases, they might be just as trustworthy, and in other cases, they might not be," he said.

\* What's in your egg. Labels like cage-free are targeted at meat, dairy and eggs. Those terms may conjure up images of small Norman Rockwell-esque farms, but again, Goldstein and Karr say that only [organic products](#) have specific guidelines about animal welfare and access to outside. Nonorganic cage-free only means the hens aren't confined in cages, but they could live in a crowded room with tens of thousands of birds. Nonorganic pasture-raised means birds have access to the outside, but they may not go, and that "pasture" could be a screened-in porch with a concrete floor.

Karr and Goldstein said the organic industry pushed for more definitive animal welfare standards that might have cleared up confusion on terms like pasture-raised, which even under the current organic rules aren't well-defined. However, regulations passed under the Obama administration to go into effect this quarter will not be implemented by the Trump administration, they said.

For people who want to start buying some organic foods, Karr and Goldstein recommended the Environmental Working Group's Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce and its Dirty Dozen list, which points out which produce is best to buy organically, due to high levels of synthetic pesticides in conventional food. Strawberries, spinach and nectarines top the list.

\* Textiles too. Organic [certification](#) also covers natural fibers like cotton and wool, but definitions can get blurry once fibers become textiles, said Marci Zaroff, founder and chief executive officer of MetaWear, an organic textiles manufacturer who is on the board of directors of the Organic Trade Association.

The USDA organic seal governs fiber used in products like cotton swabs. For textiles like apparel, bedsheets and mattresses, look for the Global Organic Textile Standard seal, a private industry standard that the USDA

adopted as a complement to the organic label, she said.

"GOTS is a standard that has been adopted all over the world as the platinum standard for a certified finished organic textile," Zaroff said.

To carry the GOTS seal, the item must be certified organic from the agricultural fiber to the finished product—through the entire supply chain. That includes avoiding toxic pesticides and processing chemicals and ensures fair working conditions.

"There's no cleaner, greener textile products than a GOTS-certified product," she said.

©2018 Chicago Tribune

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: How to be smarter about buying organic (2018, April 20) retrieved 8 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-04-smarter.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--