



What Does it Mean to be an Organic Gardener?

No doubt you want your flowers to be lush and beautiful, and your vegetables bounteous and tasty. Beyond that, you want your environment to be safe—safe for you and your family, for your pets, for the birds and pollinators, and for the microscopic insects that live in your soil.

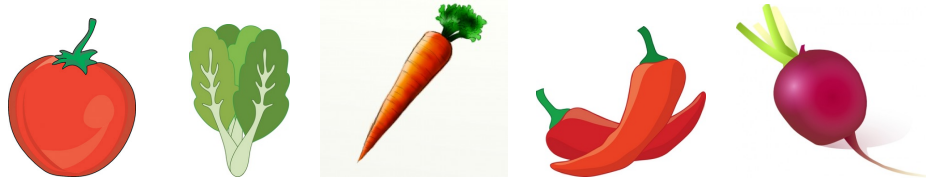
Organic gardening arose from such goals, and growing organically is one way you can be assured of the safety of your garden and its produce.

For commercial farmers, Certified Organic means that:

1. Everything that goes onto the land is permitted for certified organic production. Included are soil amendments, fertilizers, potting media, pest control products, and more. The Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) lists over 3,500 brand name products, and another 900 generic products that organic growers are allowed to use under the National Organic Program (NOP) rules. *Note: the product list is available at www.omri.org*
2. The land had not been treated with pesticides in the three years *prior* to the commitment to go organic.



For the home gardener, gardening organically simply means gardening without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. The soil is a living system, and the primary job of the organic gardener is to nourish it. Use this primary objective as a guiding principle and you won't go wrong.



Here are a few questions answered:

Q: What's the difference between conventional seed and organic seed?

Certified Organic seed is produced by a Certified Organic grower, without the use of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, or other substances that are not allowed under NOP rules. Even though most seed is not

produced by a Certified Organic grower, it is safe to use in your garden, as long as it has not been treated by a chemical pesticide. Note that pelleting, an inert coating that aids germination, is becoming more common on seeds. This treatment *is* allowed in organic production.



Q: What does the “USDA Organic” seal mean? What about a seal indicating organic certification by a state?

Certification is intended to protect consumers from misuse of the term “organic.” In 2002, the USDA’s National Organic Program set strict standards for growing foods organically. Crops and land must be managed according to an Organic System Plan that is approved by the USDA, and regularly inspected by an accredited certifier. When a product has the “USDA Organic seal,” it is *Certified Organic*. The inspections are handled by state, non-profit, and private agencies that have been approved by the USDA—which is why state seals are used.

Q: What about products with the seal “Certified Naturally Grown?”

“Certified Naturally Grown” is generally thought of as the grass-roots alternative to Certified Organic. A national certification organization, it is based on the same standards as the NOP, but is not affiliated with the USDA, and does not have the same rigorous inspection requirements. CNG farmers don’t use any synthetic herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, or genetically modified organisms.



Q: Must I garden with certified organic seeds to be truly organic?

No. In the home garden, you can rest assured that if your site is not contaminated, and you stay away from chemical pesticides and synthetic soil additives, your garden and your produce will meet (if not exceed) the standards of the organic produce you buy in the store.



Q: Are hybrid seeds organic?

Hybrids seeds can absolutely be organic, though not all of them are. Hybrid seeds are developed when two different varieties of the same type of plant are crossed in order to improve a characteristic of the resulting plant, such as better yield, disease resistance, or improved color. Many types of hybrid seeds are currently being produced by Certified Organic growers.

Q: Can genetically engineered (GE) seeds be organic?

No. The use of genetic engineering is prohibited in organic farming and, in fact, organic farmers must take preventive measures to ensure that the seeds they produce are not contaminated by GE crops (commonly referred to as GMOs) grown by neighbors. This can mean timing plantings to prevent cross-pollination by the neighbors’ crops, or designating the edges of their land as a buffer zone.

Q: Why do organic seeds cost more than non-organic seeds?

You pay now, or you pay later. With organic seed production, weed control is more labor intensive, and methods of soil management more costly. In addition, more oversight is required to ensure that organic growers adhere to rules and regulations, which adds administrative costs. Long term, however, negative environmental costs—caused by fossil fuel use, or pesticide damage to non-target insects—are avoided on organically farmed land.

In the end, whether you choose to use Certified Organic seeds or not is a personal decision, which can be based on what’s available to you, how much you know about your seed suppliers, or on your individual set of guidelines. More impactful than the seeds you choose are the gardening practices you use. Keep your soil healthy and avoid using harmful products on your plants, and chances are excellent that your garden will be a success story.