

So what do all these weird terms mean?

Some plain English definitions

Agriculture

The cultivation of crops & raising livestock for the production of food & other products

Agrochemical

A chemical or chemical compound used in farming. Also an adjective to describe produced derived from farms that extensively use these chemicals, or the method of agriculture that utilizes agrochemicals

Aquaculture

The farming of fish & other creatures that live in fresh water or sea water such as prawns & salmon

Artificial additives

Chemicals & chemical compounds that are added to foods to manipulate their colour, taste, texture or shelf life. These include powerful toxins such as tartrazine, a neurotoxin that is used in cordials & soft drinks to dye them orange. Only seven of the thousands of additives used in non-organic food may be used in organic food.

Biodiversity

The wide diversity of plants & creatures that occurs in nature. Also the ideal of organic systems of farming, biodiversity is a term to describe farms rich in different species of plants & animals, whether intentionally cultivated & bred or occurring naturally

Biodynamic

Based on the work of early 20th century theosophist Rudolf Steiner, biodynamic farming relies on companion planting, homeopathic preparations & a seven-year cycle of crop rotation, in order to remain entirely chemical free. Biodynamic farms are completely self-contained, integrating different crops & livestock to create a mini-ecosystem. The lunar calendar is used as a guide to planting & harvesting crops, with different star constellations signalling the most fruitful times for these activities. Biodynamic farming is part of the family of organic farming methods.

Certification

Each organic certification board has a different code of standards. However, the basic organic standards are legally defined in international law, so every certification board throughout the world must at least comply with these standards. Check details with each certifier if you want to know whether they enforce standard organic standards or stricter standards.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a concept that encourages local, environmentally sustainable food production, and that supports both farmers and consumers alike. It is a concept that originated in Switzerland and Japan in the 1960s, and its basis is to “put the farmers face on food”. In this way, CSA seeks to connect consumers with the story of their food, including both the farmers who grow it and the environment in which the food is produced

Companion planting

A method of growing plants in combinations that optimize their beneficial effects while minimizing their negative effects. For example, growing potatoes near tomatoes weakens their resistance to potato blight, so this should be avoided. Growing chamomile & peppermint is beneficial as both plants produce more active essential oils in combination. Companion planting is a practical way of conserving & utilizing biodiversity.

Compost

Vegetables, fruit & animal matter that has been purposely decomposed (aerobically fermented) to create nutrients for growing crops. Encourages good soil quality & beneficial enzyme production. Organic farmers must follow strict procedures to produce compost & manures. They compost for lengthy periods to ensure that e-coli & other bugs are killed off. Compost is also extensively manufactured & utilized by organic home gardeners.

Crop rotation

A traditional method of effectively managing soil fertility on a farm by systematically rotating crops between different fields. This method often includes leaving fields to lie fallow, meaning that they are rested from production to regain their naturally fertile soil.

Fair trade

The concept that a fair price will be paid for goods produced by farmers and workers in the developing world. Many poorer farmers are forced to sell their products for much less than is just if there is no other outlet for them. Fair trade means that a buyer from the developed world will not exploit this opportunity to pay less money for a commodity than it is worth. Effectively, honourable behaviour rather than exploitation. The official Fairtrade Mark prohibits child labour or forced labour & guarantees that workers receive a decent standard of housing, healthcare, safety & employment rights. It also promotes programs for environmental sustainability.

Farmer-Direct

This refers to fruit, veggies, eggs etc. have been bought directly from farmers. It means that farmer's get a better and fairer price for their produce that generally still ends up being cheaper for a co-op than buying through a wholesaler. This is because buying directly from farmers cuts out the middle people and also their mark-up. It also results in less transportation back and forth, reducing food miles and greenhouse gas emissions and the produce is generally fresher.

Fertilizers

Generally refers to synthetic chemicals & chemical compounds based on synthetic chemical & chemical compounds to give plants extra nutrients for growth. An excess of nitrates is known to cause cancer in humans & animals. Organic farming uses natural fertilizer instead, such as manure, seaweed, clays & rockdust.

Free range

A term to describe farm animals & birds that have been able to gain some access to open pastures & skies. When applied to chickens & their eggs, it may simply mean that that chicken house has "pop holes" but does not guarantee that the birds will have used these exits, especially if they have been bred in confinement. In the UK, the Soil Association has the highest standards for free range poultry & eggs, prohibiting de-beaking or overcrowding & ensuring that all birds range properly in daylight. If in doubt, check with your local certification board for details of their guidelines.

Fungicides

Chemicals & chemical compounds used to prevent moulds growing on crops & food products by killing fungal spores. Organic farming prohibits their use. However, where whole crops might be lost to something like potato blight or mildew, small amounts of traditional chemicals, such as copper & sulphur compounds may be used by organic farmers. This practice is restricted to extreme cases & permission must be granted from an organic certifier.

Gardening

The practice of organic gardening is an extremely valuable activity. The United Nations' Food & Agriculture Organisation has calculated that small biodiversity gardens can produce thousands of times more food per acre than large intensive monocultures. Home gardening in Indonesia provides around 40% of all food & in Eastern Nigeria, the 2% of land cultivated as domestic gardens provides 50% of the food. Gardening provides people in industrialized nations with a connection to the food they eat, whether it is growing herbs in a window box or fruit & vegetables in garden.

Genetic modification

The manipulation of generic material between different unrelated species of living entities. In agriculture, the creation of crops known as Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) or Transgenic Organic by extracting genes from one species & inserting them in another. GM farming is part of the family of farming styles that makes up agrochemical farming.

GMOs

Genetically Modified Organisms - see above

Herbicides

Chemicals and chemical compounds used to kill weeds. Organic farming prohibits their use.

Hydroponics

A modern method of agrochemical farming that grows plants in a purely synthetic environment. The plants are suspended into a liquid mixture of nutrient compounds in a medium of sand or gravel. Bright lights are often used to stimulate plant growth. Many non-organic potato & tomatoes crops are now routinely grown without soil.

Insecticides

Chemicals & chemical compounds used to kill insects.

Irradiation

The passing of food through a radiation field to preserve it beyond its natural shelf life. It involves gamma rays & Cobalt 60 and forms part of the nuclear fuel cycle. The use of ionizing radiation to preserve food is prohibited under organic standards.

Legumes

Crops related to the bean family. Planted extensively in organic agriculture to maintain beneficial levels of nitrogen in the soil. Legumes have the capacity to fix nitrogen from the air into the soil through nodules in their roots. They are often planted as part of the crop rotation in fallow fields.

Monocultures

Agrochemical farms that continually grow only one kind of crop over a vast area. Monocultures are the antithesis of biodiversity & they are the prevalent form of agriculture in most industrialized nations as at the beginning of the 21st century. Four percent of all farms in the USA produce half of the food grown there, growing only a single species on huge swathes of land.

Organic

A method of farming based on the cultivation of good soil quality & biodiversity. The use of agrochemicals is strictly regulated & kept to the absolute minimum. It prohibits GMOs (even in animal feed) & is a legally binding term defined in international law. The rearing of organic animals must be according to strict welfare standards & they may only be treated with antibiotics as a last resort to cure illness. When the term is used to describe a food product or item, at least 95% of its ingredients must be certified organic & it may not be irradiated.

Permaculture

This is the design & maintenance of food growing systems which have the diversity, stability, & resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of the landscape with people, in cities or rural areas. Permaculture can be as small as a city balcony or as large as a forest. It is a way of providing food, energy, shelter & other material & non-material needs in a sustainable way.

Pesticides

Chemicals & chemical compounds used by farmers & gardeners to kill pests. These products often contain organophosphates which belong to the same family of chemicals as nerve gases. Synthetic pesticides are applied to crops & livestock as a matter of course for the prevention & treatment of pests in agrochemical agriculture. In organic farming, pesticides may only be applied to crops if all other non-chemical actions to tackle a pest problem have failed & then only with permission from a certifier. Organic farming relies on biodiversity to provide natural predators to control pests, or uses natural plant-pesticides. Standards are rigorous & organic farms unfortunate enough to be affected by pesticide drift from neighbouring agrochemical properties have on occasion had their licences revoked.

Prevention

The method utilised by organic farmers to minimize the use of agrochemicals, hormones and antibiotics in farming practices. Pesticide use is minimized by careful management, from companion planting to the use of satellite technology to detect potential parasites. Chemical use for livestock is minimized by keeping numbers of animals and fish lower per pen, & encouraging movement within the farm or fish tank.

Processed food

Food that has been ready prepared from its raw state for consumption. This can be through a variety of processes, including boiling, slicing & banking. Processing food by its very nature removes nutrients & vitality. 70% of all food grown in the USA is processed before it is retailed. Only 1% of food grown in India is processed before it is retailed. Indian citizens do not eat their produce raw, but simply process the ingredients themselves at home.

Selective breeding

A traditional generic technique that produces plants or animals with a particular genetic profile. Reasons may include creating a distinctive taste, unusual colour or hardier variety. It is unrelated to modern genetic modification, as selective breeding takes part between plants of the same species through interbreeding rather than between differing species using DNA displacement technology.

Adapted from the glossary in Farmer's Market Cookbook by Ysabbe Soevack, publisher: Hermes House & Anness Publishing Ltd, London in 2003

