

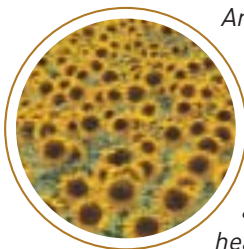


AN ECOLOGICALLY AND SOCIALLY FRIENDLY FOOD SYSTEM

An Internet search for “organic agriculture” yields more than half a million sites in less than one second.

The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), a private body that sets standards for organic agriculture, has 750 member organizations in more than 100 countries.

Codex Alimentarius Commission, the United Nations body that oversees the world’s food standards, deliberated long and hard to define organic agriculture as a “holistic production management system that avoids use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, minimizes pollution of air, soil and water, and optimizes the health and productivity of independent communities of life, plants, animals and people”.



Organic agriculture has its roots in traditional agricultural practices that evolved in countless villages and farming communities over the millennia. By trial-and-error local farmers passed their best results from generation to generation. The modern face of organic agriculture emerged in the late 1960s, when farmers and consumers began to recognize that the enormous amount of chemicals being used in both crop and animal production could have dire consequences for the earth and its people.

Although its initial modern image was of health nuts and hippies, **organic agriculture has moved into the mainstream. It is now the fastest growing food sector.** From coffee in Mexico to tea in China, from shrimp in Thailand to beef in Argentina, from cotton in Uganda to olives in Italy – today’s organic farmers build on the past, using modern scientific research to guide them in upgrading their traditional farming methods.

Science can now explain how and why those methods worked, opening avenues for even further improvement. New information emerges constantly from scientific research, uncovering nature’s incredible secrets like pieces in a gigantic ecological puzzle – bees pass through natural foot baths in their hives that reduce mould in strawberries; bats, long considered crop pests, actually provide many services such as



Cellulose sheets on soil do control weeds

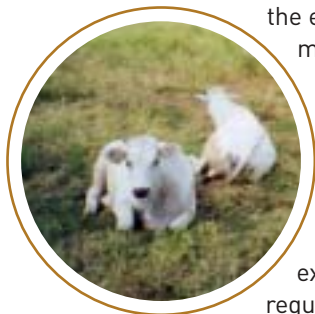
organic agriculture: **WHAT IS IT?**



pollinating, dispersing seeds and controlling insects; earthworms, bacteria and fungi serve as soil “engineers” and create conditions for water and

nutrients to circulate. The more farmers know about these puzzle pieces, the better their ability to manage the natural elements and benefit.

The organic movement exists amidst controversy. Doubters express concerns that without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides there will not be enough yields to feed the earth’s growing population, that the



market is driven by developed countries whose strict regulations cannot be met by developing-country producers, that organic agriculture’s labour-intensive production methods increase drudgery. Movement supporters point out that crop yields often decline after extended chemical use, increased labour requirements of organic agriculture

balance with decreased expenditures for inputs, organic products do not have to be certified to be legitimate, and that there is no way to put a monetary value on conserving the earth’s biodiversity and fragile ecosystems as well as its local cultures and culinary traditions.

Absence of synthetic inputs is not the only prerequisite of organic agriculture. In fact, traditional systems that are “negligent”, that carelessly mine soil nutrients or overgraze pastures, would not qualify for any organic status, even if there



are no inputs present. Traditional farms do not need to be certified to be considered “organic”; when farmers follow organic management principles, thus producing food while conserving natural resources, they qualify as “non-certified organic”.

The type of production methods organic farmers choose depends on more than agro-environmental conditions.

It also depends on socio-economic situations, such as their labour and investment capacity and on the targeted market. Organic farmers put great efforts into study and training, seeking out developments appropriate for their farms, adapting them, and eventually going through inspection and certification to access markets, all aimed at creating a sustainable system throughout the food supply chain. The goal is for fields and animals to produce to their maximum and for farmers to protect the quality of their air, soil and streams.

As the organic food system grows, so does its ability to connect people with their environments.



info: www.fao.org/organicag

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