

## What makes food “organic”?



Since 2002, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has controlled use of the word "organic" for marketing food and farm products. Anybody selling organic food must understand and comply with the USDA definition. Those found in noncompliance can be fined up to \$10,000. (See [www.ams.usda.gov/nop/](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/))

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### Goals:

- Foster **cycling of resources**
- Promote **ecological balance**
- Conserve **biodiversity**

### Requirements:

- **Organic Farm Plan** describing how farm and processors will comply with regulations (except if farm sells <\$5,000 in organic products annually through direct-market channels)
- **No prohibited substances** applied to land for at least three years prior to harvest
- **Erosion management plan**
- **Crop rotation**
- Maintenance of production and handling **records**
- Distinct, defined **boundaries and buffer zones** to prevent contamination from neighboring land
- Strategies to **prevent contamination** of crops, soil and water by plant and animal nutrients, pathogenic organisms, heavy metals or residues of prohibited substances
- Use of **organic seeds** when commercially available
- **Audits and evaluations** conducted by accredited certifying agents

### Key words

#### Ecosystem

A system formed by the interaction of living things with each other and with their environment.

#### Biodiversity

The variability among living things in an ecosystem.

#### Resource cycling

The movement of materials within an ecosystem, instead of in and out of it.

#### Ecological Balance

A state of dynamic equilibrium in which species composition and material concentration in an ecosystem remains relatively stable.

### Unregulated benefits

(often associated with organic food, but not guaranteed by organic standards)

- Profitable small farms
- Nutritional benefits (more vitamin C, more dry matter, more phytochemicals, less nitrate)
- Farm-worker safety
- Reduced energy use

### Prohibited:

- Sewage-sludge fertilizers
- Most synthetic fertilizers and pesticides (exceptions include soaps, Borax, lime-sulfur)
- Genetically modified organisms
- Growth hormones
- Irradiation
- Antibiotics

The KSU Organic Agriculture Working Group develops, evaluates, and demonstrates socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable agriculture systems compatible with USDA organic standards and suitable for adoption by small farmers and gardeners. (See <http://organic.kysu.edu>)

**organic.kysu.edu**  
KENTUCKY STATE UNIVERSITY ORGANIC AGRICULTURE WORKING GROUP



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