

# The Roanoke Times

## Organic Produce: The Secret to Sustainability

By Lindsey Flowers | Sept. 30, 2015

The New River Valley is home to many small organic farms. For years, people have praised organic food for its lack of toxins and chemicals rumored to be in nonorganic produce. However, recent studies have shown that the chemicals may not be as toxic as originally predicted.

It is very difficult for produce to be classified as organic; the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has set standards that farms must meet in order to earn the organic title: Farms must preserve natural resources and biodiversity, support animal health and welfare and not use genetically modified ingredients.

These genetically modified ingredients once caused uproar in the health-conscious community. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are genetically altered produce or livestock that scientists designed to be more resilient and grow uniformly. While they increased crop yields, scientists once thought that GMOs contained toxic elements, including carcinogens, toxins and allergens.

This scare fueled the distrust of GMOs for years. However, recently a University of California-Davis study found no disparity between the health of livestock that consumed GMO-filled produce and livestock that did not. This raises a question: Are there any benefits to purchasing organic food? Research has found that yes, there are.

Organic farming does more than simply provide nutrient-rich produce to families: It creates sustainable growth environments for food and livestock.

Farmers that practice traditional nonorganic methods often hurt the land in order to increase their profits. They solely grow one type of crop over a large area, creating a

monoculture. While this seems efficient, the Union of Concerned Scientists has found that this makes the crops more vulnerable to pests—this results in more harmful pesticides being necessary. The crops are not as nutritious, and the soil is damaged.

Unlike traditional farming practices, organic farming focuses on growing crops that will thrive in the land without using pesticides or harming the soil. Crop rotation is a technique that acts as a natural pesticide, resulting in fresh soil and produce without unnecessary chemicals. Organic farms also tend to be more biologically diverse than traditional farms, drawing natural pest predators—crows, spiders and insects—to the land.

Organic farming promotes sustainability in the New River Valley area. Blacksburg and the surrounding New River Valley has already shown itself to be environmentally-conscious with yearly Sustainability Weeks, sustainable options at dining halls and farmers markets throughout the area.

Purchasing local, organic food is an investment in a sustainable New River Valley. By purchasing local produce from farmers markets and directly from farms, consumers are taking a stand against large, monoculture farms that prioritize profits rather than the condition of the land after the season finishes. Purchasing locally grown food also lowers fossil fuel emissions that damage the ozone layer, as they have to travel far less than other produce to reach vendors.

New River Valley residents can find locally farmed produce at farmers markets throughout the region.