**GROWING ORGANIC**

Simply put, certified organic foods have been farmed without synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, and do not use genetically modified organisms (GMO’s). Advocates for organic food equate fewer chemicals with better health and safety, while conventional farming advocates argue that food safety is at rick without synthetic controls, and that conventional farming is necessary to sustain the food supply.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which oversees organic certification, reports that the majority of consumers make organic purchases at least occasionally, and that the organic foods industry has been double digit growth each year since 1990.

DAIRY: To raise certified organic cows, no hormones or antibiotics can ever be used. The cows must be fed 100 percent organic feed, and they must always have access to outdoors. During grazing season, at least 30 percent of their diet must come from pasture. The land on which they’re raised must also be certified organic, meaning it cannot be treated with synthetic pesticides and herbicides, or contain GMO grasses, and it must adhere to the three-year transition rule.

Obtaining enough organic cows is key to keeping up with demand. To be certified, an organic calf is born to an organic cow, or a conventional cow is converted; it must be managed under organic practices for a year.

One big challenge for the organic business is the cost of organic feed, the culprit behind the higher price of organic dairy products. The organic milk guy and the organic chicken guy and the organic cereal guy and everybody else is competing for the same basket of feed.

CHICKEN:

Unlike dairy cows, the USDA does not allow farmers to convert live conventional animals intended for meat sales to organic. This means farmers must start raising a chicken as organic from the moment it hatches. Otherwise, chickens follow the same organic requirements as cows; no hormones or antibiotics, and the farms and feed must be certified organic. In addition the building materials are restricted to ensure there’s no chemical exposure. Chicken houses must have natural light, fresh air and openings for the birds to go outside into fenced pasture. Also farm employees are prohibited from owning chickens at home to reduce chances of cross-contamination with work birds.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES;

For an orchard to be considered organic, it cannot be treated with pesticides or fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or with organic matter derived from sewage sludge. GMOs are prohibited, as is irradiation. There must be buffers between organic and conventional orchards, in addition to long-term soil management plans. In all organic operations, keeping strict records of treatments to

The land (or animals) is key; they must be inspected by USDA approved certifying agencies to ensure that they meet the standards. If an infestation occurs, there are several techniques to combat pests organically. Two common practices used are mating disruption, which scents the orchard with pheromones to derail a bug’s reproduction, and using beneficial predators, such as lady-bugs and syrphid flies, which eat aphids. If all other methods fail, USDA has a short list of approved synthetic pesticides.

Organic greens cost more for a few reasons. “First is the weeds”. There are no chemicals can be used to rid the field of weeds. All weeds are done by hand, and that is expensive.

THREE YEAR TRANSITION:

Of the many requirements for organic certification, the three year transition rule impacts supply for all organic foods. Land previously used to raise conventional food or livestock must be managed under organic methods (or lie fallow) for three years before food harvested from it can be harvested from it can be sold as certified organic.

For additional information on any organic requirements, visit ams.usda.gov and click “National Organic Program”