

Title:

Organic Tea, Exactly What is Organic

Word Count:

603

Summary:

The word "organic" seems simple enough but can be confusing for consumers. Here is an inside look at the standards and laws governing this important group of products, particularly tea.

Keywords:

Tea, teas, organic, organic tea, organic teas

Article Body:

The word "organic" seems simple enough but can be confusing for consumers. Here is an inside look at the standards and laws governing this important group of products, particularly tea.

What exactly determines if a product is grown organically?

In 1990, Congress passed the Organic Food Production Act (OFPA) requiring the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to develop national organic standards. The National Organic Program (NOP) and OFPA developed regulations requiring products labeled "organic" originate from farms, or handling facilities, that are certified by either State or private agencies that have been accredited by the USDA.

The regulations further state that farms, or handling facilities may not use any of the following in production or handling;

- Genetic Engineering
- Ionizing Radiation
- Sewage Sludge

Organic crops must be grown without the use of;

- Most conventional pesticides
- Petroleum based fertilizers
- Sewage sludge-based fertilizers

How are imported organic products regulated?

- The USDA is required by OFPA to review the certification programs under which imported organic products are produced.
- Certifying agents in foreign countries must apply for USDA certification.
- In lieu of USDA certification, foreign governments can assess and accredit certifying agents, under NOP requirements, with USDA approval.
- An equivalency agreement negotiated between the US and a country's government may also be used in lieu of certification.

What are "organic" labeling standards?

Organic labeling is the simplest part of the certification process and the aspect that is most confusing for consumers. While many times "organic" on a label means you pay more, what is the meaning behind the label? The standards are based on the percentage of organic ingredients in a product, and by law must be identified like this;

- Products labeled "100 % organic" must contain only organically produced ingredients.
- Products labeled "organic" must consist of at least 95% organically produced ingredients.
- Both may display the USDA Organic Seal.
- Processed products that contain at least 70% organic ingredients can only use the phrase "made with organic ingredients".
- Processed products that contain less than 70% organic ingredients cannot use the term "organic" other than to identify the specific ingredients, on the ingredients list, that are organically produced.

So what does all this mean to US tea consumers? Since tea is grown outside of the US certification is almost always done by foreign agents. It has become increasingly important for consumers concerned about how their teas are grown to be comfortable with their tea supplier. Bio terrorism laws have impacted tea importation by looking more closely overall at what and who are importing products into this country, particularly food products. While these laws can sometimes impede the smooth flow of tea to us from overseas it may be beneficial overall to consumers due to the "closer look" of the FDA.

Converting gardens and estates to organic farming is a costly and lengthy process and sometimes not even a consideration for small farmers. In some cases

farmers are already doing a lot right, but lack the knowledge or funding necessary to become certified. There is an effort by the US tea industry to educate growers on the benefit both economically and ecologically for growing teas organically.

Quality, from a taste perspective, has been an issue with organic teas. Gardens converting to organic farming have challenges, short and long term, producing teas that taste as good. As processes continue to improve and farmers gain more experience, quality and taste are improving.

As an importer and supplier of premium teas one of our major responsibilities is knowing the production standards and philosophies of the gardens we work with. Securing quality, organic teas with outstanding taste characteristics can be challenging but more become available each season.