

# Shopping Your Values: Organic | Earth911.com

## Shopping Your Values: Organic



Share this idea!

This is the final article in a [six-part series](#) focused on helping consumers choose products that align with their values.

Of all the eco-labels, “organic” has arguably generated the most interest. It is also one of the clearest and most consistent certification systems because the USDA regulates it. The USDA established organic standards after an often-contentious public process with input from all stakeholders.

It is surprising then that in a recent [consumer survey](#), “organic” ranked least important to consumers of the 11 product claims surveyed. The study concludes that consumers may have been swayed by news reports suggesting the [“organic” label is poorly enforced](#) and often meaningless.

Is organic meaningless? Or should eco-conscious shoppers care more about the organic label when they’re trying to shop their values?

### USDA Regulation

For many eco-issues, like [cruelty free](#), numerous third-party and industry-led organizations are vying for your attention with competing labels. In contrast, the federal government legally defines and regulates the term “organic.”

The [Organic Foods Production Act of 1990](#) established the standards for organic certification, which cover all aspects of produce and livestock practices. Depending on one’s perspective, some of these standards are [insufficient](#). But the [standards](#) reflect a general consensus on what constitutes the most environmentally friendly agricultural processes that are practical for commercial farming. To achieve certification, organic operations must demonstrate that they are protecting natural resources, conserving biodiversity, and using only approved substances. USDA organic standards do not allow products containing GMOs to be certified organic.

## Organic Labels

Even within the organic standards, there are [four labeling categories](#) for products under the federal organic standards:

- **100% Organic:** Most people think that “organic” means “entirely organic.” But it doesn’t. If you want to make sure that the products you buy are entirely organic, look for the “100% Organic” label.
- **Organic:** Products labeled simply “organic” only need to contain 95 percent organic ingredients. This definition exists for situations where an organic ingredient may not be available or is unavailable in sufficient quantities.
- **Made with organic ingredients:** To bear this label, only 70 percent of the product must be organic.
- **Specific organic ingredients:** Products containing less than 70 percent organic content must list the specific organic ingredients in any packaging claims.

## Enforcing the Standards

As mentioned in the consumer values study, there has been concern about how rigorously organic standards are enforced, particularly with regard to [imported foods](#). In the wake of the damning results of the 2017 audit, the USDA established a timeline for improving. Positive [steps have been taken](#), but concerned shoppers may want to shop [locally](#) until a new audit confirms the loopholes have been closed.

## Alternatives to Organic

For nearly 30 years, USDA Organic has dominated sustainability certification. But there are alternative certifications.

- **Real Organic Project:** Concerns about enforcement, the decision to allow hydroponically-grown produce to be certified organic, and the failure to add animal welfare to the organic standard led a group of small farmers to create a supplementary label called [Real Organic Project](#).
- **Certified Naturally Grown:** [Certified Naturally Grown](#) standards are nearly identical to USDA organic, but enforcement is through peer review, which makes the certification process more affordable.
- **Food Alliance Certified:** [Food Alliance](#) is a nonprofit, third-party certification system that takes a different approach to sustainability from the organic standards. Instead of focusing on natural versus synthetic, Food Alliance takes a risk management approach. They require farmers to take steps to prevent pest problems. But they also allow them to respond to problems with the minimum sufficient use of chemicals.
- **Biodynamic:** A holistic farming philosophy based on the work of Dr. Rudolf Steiner, [biodynamic](#) farms emphasize biodiversity and ecological processes. The certification for this system of standards is “[Demeter Certified Biodynamic](#).”

While these certifications might achieve a higher standard of sustainability, they are not as widely available as USDA organic. Organic certification does not always live up to its promise. But it does certify that producers did not use toxic pesticides and fertilizers. In that sense, it is the food product equivalent of “[non-toxic](#),” a far less regulated label that is usually used for cleaning products — and is the top concern of consumers trying to shop their values.

Do you look for the USDA organic label when you shop? Share your thoughts in the [Earthling Forum](#).

## You Might Also Like...



### Organic Gardening Books to Help Your Garden Grow

At the core of homesteading, the ultimate self-sufficient lifestyle, is growing ...Lauren Murphy March 8, 2018



### Is Organic Food Healthier? All the Factors Analyzed

Organic food has become incredibly popular in the past five ...Madeleine Somerville November 15, 2017



### **Organic Vodkas: Why It's Important and Where To Find Them**

Why not raise a glass to celebrate the fabulous options ...Kimberly Button November 3, 2015