

Organic farming: The best choice for our environment and growing world?



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Organic, locally grown food: Better for your family and for our hungry world – right?

Heading to the farmer's market in the warm spring sunshine, it's easy to feel like you're doing everyone on Earth a small favor. But like with so many things in life, it depends.

The truth is, there is no silver bullet when it comes to [solving food security](#) and environmental challenges in a world that will count 9 billion people by 2050.

So rather than asking which system comes out ahead, we must focus on how farms perform. In some cases, conventional methods will have higher yields as well as a smaller environmental impact.

That's why we can't afford to shut the door on either strategy. Let me explain why.

Optimal yield? Location, location, location.

In agriculturally developed regions such as Europe and North America, research has shown a 20-percent reduction in yields for organically grown food, compared with conventional – although the drop could be just 13 percent when best practices are used.

In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and some other landscapes, however, products that can help maximize yields aren't always available or affordable. This, in turn, leads to big food production gaps.

Where access to chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides is limited, using organic sources of nutrients – animal manure, in particular – along with non-chemical pest and weed control methods can significantly boost crops.

Growing methods must and will vary, depending on whether the food is produced in Malawi or Montana, Belgium or Brazil.

Pesticides, fertilizers boost production. Or not.

Conventional farms that use synthetic herbicides and pesticides inefficiently can contribute to climate and water pollution. [If used efficiently](#), those same herbicides and pesticides can make it easier for farmer to adopt no-till and other practices that bring a net benefit to the

environment when soil gets healthier, erosion slows, and water and air quality improves.

Likewise, when organic farmers turn to mechanical weeding, they can inadvertently harm nesting birds and other animals – while contributing to erosion and fuel emissions. And while manure is beneficial to soils in organic systems, it can also pollute waterways and lead to health problems if not properly applied.

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This is why we need to change the conversation about sustainable agriculture to talk about performance – rather than focusing on which production systems are good or bad. And instead of pointing fingers at [bigger, conventional farming](#) operations.

Performance is a better paradigm for sustainable agriculture.

Our challenge and opportunity now is to help all farmers, everywhere, pursue practices and innovations that protect the land, while ramping up yields for a growing population. We need everyone, organic and conventional, to step up to the plate.

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