



## Can sustainable farming feed the world?

Posted by [Yankee](#) on March 21, 2006 - 3:44pm

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

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Tom Philpott over at Gristmill has an [interesting post](#) on the sustainability of organic farming vs. big agribusiness and "industrial-organic" farming.

Philpott writes:

To an extent, the problem is one of semantics, centering on the definition of "sustainable." To many green types, places like Whole Foods and Wild Oats teem with "sustainably produced" stuff -- everything from T-shirts to apples, chicken and eggs, even versions of Twizzlers and TV dinners. But the great bulk of it falls under the rubric of industrial-organic -- like the wares on offer at Wal-Mart, only a little less so, these goods depend on a culture of cheap and plentiful crude oil and labor.

The cheap-oil problem has certainly gained traction among greens. Blogs devoted to "peak oil" abound; this very blog seems like one at times. Most of these discussions, though, devolve into sniping about biofuels and hybrids. It's important to wonder how we'd get around in an era of super-high oil prices.

But I don't understand why more people aren't worried about what we'd eat.

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I have long been wary about what Philpott calls "industrial organic" farming. In fact, most of the organic names you're probably familiar with are owned by huge companies that you may associate with poor agricultural practices: Cargill, Dean, Danone, ConAgra. Here's a [fascinating chart](#) that maps out all of the relationships between big food companies and their organic labels. Once you see this, you realize it's no surprise that these companies are trying to get the government to weaken their rigid organic standards with the National Uniformity for Food Act [[H.R.4167.EH](#)] ([Sustainablog](#), [Grist](#).)

For the time being, the violations that these big-box organics producers seem to be committing have to do with some of the additives that they put in their foods, or [how many cows are crammed into a single feedlot](#). But I see another concern, more related to peak oil. The real benefit of small organic outfits is that [they're not big enough](#) to distribute to large companies like Wal-Mart, so they end up focusing on more local markets. This solves two problems: (1) the food is produced without petroleum fertilizer, and (2) the food doesn't have to travel very far. (As we [reported a long time ago](#), given the choice between local and organic, local often makes more sense.) As long as we continue to encourage centralized and mass-produced organics, we can be sure that they're going to be traveling thousands of miles to get to our kitchens.

So what do we do? It's sort of a damned-if-you-do, damned-if -you-don't scenario: while we should relish the fact that consumer desires appear to be forcing big agribusiness to apply organic principles, we are opening the door to a watering down of the standards by companies that don't exactly have stellar environmental and ethical pasts. Says Jason Mark of the [SF Chronicle](#):

Critics also question whether the agribusiness model can harmonize with the organic ethic: A 100-acre monocrop planted with a single variety of vegetable and picked by migrant workers hardly fits with the organic vision of ecologically sustainable and socially responsible farming. The challenge is how to reconcile organic agriculture's emphasis on biodiversity and small- scale production with corporations' emphasis on uniformity and mass-marketing.

So what's a consumer to do? If you value foods free of pesticides and genetically modified organisms, by all means look for the USDA organic label and let your dollar be an expression of your values. At the same time, remain vigilant about efforts to water down the organic standards and work to ensure the integrity of the organic name.

But the best guarantee that your food will be produced according to environmental and social principles is to meet the people who grow it. Support your local farmers' market and become friendly with the vendors there. Or get a subscription with a Community Support Agriculture program, in which you get weekly food deliveries from a specific farm. Those outlets represent the original ethic of the organic food movement: That by knowing your farmers, you will truly get to know your food.

**Update [2006-3-21 16:48:31 by Yankee]:** The organic vs. local issue has come up again recently at [Slate](#). (via [Treehugger](#).) Here's another issue to analyze:

It's likely that neither Wal-Mart nor Whole Foods will do much to encourage local agriculture or small farming, but in an odd twist, Wal-Mart, with its simple "More for Less" credo, might do far more to democratize the nation's food supply than Whole Foods. The organic-food movement is in danger of exacerbating the growing gap between rich and poor in this country by contributing to a two-tiered national food supply, with healthy food for the rich. Could Wal-Mart's populist strategy prove to be more "sustainable" than Whole Foods? Stranger things have happened.



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