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## The Edgy Veggie

# When organics mean business

By Ellen Kanner

[ellenink@aol.com](mailto:ellenink@aol.com)

At last -- organics rule. They're the cover story of February's Consumer Reports, and because we're putting our money where our mouth is, they're serious money. According to the magazine, organic sales have gone up 20 percent annually over the past decade, topping \$15 billion in 2004. That's why big guys like Wal-Mart are trying to muscle in on the organic action. They're trying to do it their way, though, by pushing to weaken the U.S. Department of Agriculture's stringent organic standards.

I say let's keep them where they are. It's hard enough for consumers to know what truly qualifies as organic without diluting what organic means ("all-natural" doesn't count -- look for products with the USDA Organic label). To be certified organic, food must be produced without genetic tinkering, irradiation, antibiotics, hormones, toxic pesticides and fertilizers.

Chemicals used in conventional farming leach into the soil and groundwater. Over time, they affect plant life, wildlife, you, me and the planet we live on. Organics are better, not just our health, but for Earth's.

Organics tend to cost more to grow and more to buy, but that doesn't mean they have to wreck your budget. I'm inherently cheap, but I shop around. I love a sale. I buy in bulk. I make trade-offs. I'll buy conventionally raised asparagus and broccoli because their pesticide residue is barely a blip and they're easier on the wallet, but spring for organic peaches, where the pesticide levels are high.

Personal finance, environmental integrity, big business -- it's a lot to keep in mind when you only want dinner. But knowledge is power. Get the low-down on organics by checking out the Consumer Reports website, [consumerreports.org](http://consumerreports.org), South Florida's own [deliciousorganics.com](http://deliciousorganics.com) and books like *A Field Guide to Being Organic* (Bantam, \$14.95).

To Wal-Mart, organics are a growth industry. To me, they're a commitment to the future. Sometimes you need to think beyond your plate and your wallet. You need to think of the planet, too. Organics rule. I don't want big business to rule organics.

Ellen Kanner writes biweekly about vegetarian concerns.