

Organic Cant

Definitions: Organic.

- 1: of, relating to, or arising in a bodily organ.
- 2: of, relating to, or arising in a living thing.
- 3: of, relating to, or containing carbon compounds....

Cant.

- 1: to give a slant to.
- 2: to be in a whining manner.
- 3: to talk hypocritically.
- 4: insincere speech, especially insincerely pious words or statements....

The organic movement in agriculture first came into prominence in the 1970s after the publication of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" and with the wider realization that the overuse of industrial chemicals was polluting soil, air and water and leading to increased resistance in pests, insects and diseases.

The organic movement played an important role in showing some of the excesses of over-reliance on synthetic chemicals. However, many other individuals and agencies also played their part in reducing agriculture's reliance on synthetic chemicals.

The contrast between organic methods and typical farming methods in 1970 was very wide. Organic agriculture evoked a return to a more natural, healthy method of farming. It harked back to life, if not in the Garden of Eden, at least in a form of Paradise on Earth. It forced farmers to think more deeply about how their production practices affected the environment both in the short and long term.

Paradise Lost

During much of the next quarter century, organic agriculture was regarded as an eccentric fringe that could be safely ignored by the rest of agriculture. However, in the 1990s, its proponents succeeded in selling organic agriculture as an ideal system that the rest of agriculture should be cajoled or harassed to adopt. Many European countries set targets for how much of their agriculture should be converted to organic methods.

In the United States, the Organic Foods Production Act was passed in 1990, but the USDA's organic production standards were not implemented until 2002 because of a prolonged battle over what should or should not be included. Specifics of chemicals for which use is permitted under organic standards vary somewhat by country because of different political battles. For example, U.S. organic standards allow the use of chlorine, hydrogen peroxide, copper sulfate, and streptomycin. Changes in standards have occurred over time in a number of countries after highly politicized debates.

In the last decade, upscale retailers like Whole Foods Markets and Trader Joe's have used organic products as the core of their marketing strategy to demonstrate what Joseph Rago of

the Wall Street Journal calls their "conspicuous virtue" as buyers and the "conspicuous virtue" of their customers as consumers.

Conspicuous Virtue Everywhere

Fearing loss of market share, and unwilling to be considered less virtuous, Wal-Mart, Safeway, Kroger, et al., have recently piled into the organic category. The virtuous cant by retailers has become even more pervasive in Europe and has begun to spread to developing countries.

The organic movement has seized on these changes to push the organic agenda with business, the media, governments, and parliaments. As in most movements, the most fervent advocates shout the loudest.

As a result, in my judgment, the organic movement has become a vehicle for manipulation of consumers, an obstacle to good agricultural science, an obstacle to sound agricultural business practices, and an obstacle to sensible food policies.

Comparisons with Conventional Less and Less Relevant

There have been dramatic changes in conventional agriculture since the 1970s that have narrowed the gap between organic practices and the actual practices of many conventional farmers. Integrated production and integrated pest management methods have reduced the use of many synthetic chemicals and encouraged the use of soft pesticides.

Implementation of maximum residue levels, re-entry standards, buffer zones, better calibration of sprayers, drift prevention measures and many other initiatives have reduced chemical use. Government agencies have removed many of the more harmful chemicals from the market and more are scheduled for removal.

The toxic load (actual dose of chemicals) imposed on farms varies now in a continuum depending on actual farm practices. In that sense, comparisons between organic and conventional farms are of little relevance unless the practices of the conventional farms being compared are spelled out.

Misperceptions of Organic Virtue

At the same time, there is almost universal misperception about the actual chemicals used in organic production. Much of the literature put out by retailers perpetuates the claim that organic farming uses zero chemicals, when the truth of the matter is that organic farming also uses many chemicals, just little or no synthetic chemicals. However, like all farmers, to nourish its soils and fight pests and diseases, organic producers must use an arsenal of chemicals.

Even the major environmental movements are very careless in their description of organic practices. For example, on the website of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) in March 2007, in a discussion of the "Environmental Benefits of Organic Agriculture" the first paragraph reads, "Through its holistic nature, organic farming integrates wild biodiversity, agro-biodiversity and soil conservation, and takes low-intensity, extensive

farming further by eliminating the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs)...." Note the word "eliminating."

In a similar vein, the major British organic organization, the Soil Association, in a posting on "Pesticides in Your Food" says that "In organic farming, natural methods are used to control pests, weeds and disease", implying that no chemicals are ever used.

Consumers Totally Befuddled

Consumers have become both confused and misled. A March 2007 Populus poll in the U.K. asked consumers to choose among a list of factors that would "Make you actively choose to shop at a particular supermarket chain?" One of the choices was "A commitment to removing all chemicals from its food." That factor received the greatest response, being cited by 74% of concerned consumers. However, more worrying was that it also received the highest response, 61%, among the rest of consumers.

Clearly, consumers do not understand that their bodies are composed of chemicals and that all food is composed of chemicals. The Vitamin supplements on their shelves contain items like calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, zinc, selenium, copper, manganese, chromium, boron, nickel, etc., etc. All of these are chemicals. All are vital building blocks for a healthy body. However, in larger doses, all are potential killers.

Chemicals are everywhere. The critical issue is the level and frequency of doses that we use. The key to healthy human life and to a healthy agriculture is managing chemicals intelligently. The key is balance in meeting different desirable objectives.

Why the Organic Name is Misleading

The claim that organic agriculture is somehow more "natural" is spurious. For example, in the case of an organic orchard, nature does not plant rootstocks in neat rows, graft different cultivars on these rootstocks, provide sprinkler irrigation systems powered by electricity, or haul in supplies and out products using motorized vehicles. Nature does not engineer gentle packing systems or provide controlled atmosphere storage or haul semi-truck loads to hundreds of millions of distant consumers. Yet these manmade contrivances are accepted as part of an organic production and marketing system.

When the raw materials are processed, the link to nature becomes even more spurious. Nature does not cook baby food in cans or deep fat fry potatoes or manufacture chocolate, wrap it in aluminum foil, or store it in climate-controlled conditions from the factory to the home refrigerator.

Most of the activities in agriculture and food processing are the result of deliberate management decisions and applications of invented technology by humans. All farmers, regardless of their farm practices, are in a partnership with nature. However, it is the ingenuity of humans that has been the key factor in influencing the outcomes from nature. It has been the ingenuity of humans that now allows the earth to support 6 billion people with an unprecedented abundance of food.

Why Organics lead to Bad Economics

Organic agriculture leads to bad economics. It starts with a solution, and a set of practices that are deemed optimal and immutable. However, in the real world, the goals of societies and businesses are constantly changing as new issues and concerns come to the fore. Over the years, agriculture has been called on to meet varying challenges such as pesticide residues, world hunger, energy crises, food safety, concerns about cancer and heart problems, food security, obesity, and many others.

Many of these goals may be conflicting. For example, in order to meet consumer desires for organic products instead of conventional products out of season, the organic products may have to be imported long distances with significantly increased energy use. New tradeoffs will be required as goals change. Agriculture has to be able to make intelligent choices in changing the allocation of its resources to meet those changing goals. It makes no sense to lock agriculture into a rigid framework that was appropriate technology 200 years ago.

As long as only a small share of agriculture was locked into organic practices, the remainder of agriculture retained the flexibility to adapt to changing national and global goals. But that flexibility could be dangerously reduced if organic standards were to be applied too widely.

Why Organics leads to Bad Science

Supporters of organic standards and practices believe that their formulas provide the answers to a multitude of societal problems including human health, soil health, bio-diversity, social and cultural degradation, food security, social justice, saving small farmers, etc. (See, for example IFOAM or Soil Association web sites.) Thus, they wish to use science to prove that their beliefs are correct.

However, science must always be skeptical. Good science is science that is free to test beliefs against the observed and measurable realities. Science must always be ready to challenge beliefs when new information or new knowledge becomes available. Good science must be as ready to challenge the use of any chemical as to challenge the non-use of that chemical.

That is why, it is worrying that more, and more universities are setting up programs in organic agriculture. These are more likely to lead to advocacy of the organic viewpoint and indoctrination of students, rather than the healthy skepticism needed for science to remain vibrant. Society has a vital interest in maintaining the scientific integrity of its universities.

Good science both examines the evidence that supports any hypothesis and, even more importantly, tries to find evidence that the hypothesis is not true. Good science will examine all the factors that affect soil quality, pest control, product quality, residues, food safety, farmer profitability and sustainability, etc. It cannot pursue the truth effectively from within an ideological straightjacket.

The GMO Exclusion

One of the best examples of this straightjacket mentality is the organic movement's broad condemnation of the use of advances in molecular science in agriculture. IFOAM, etc., prefer to use the fear-loaded term, "genetically modified organisms (GMOs)" rather than talk about molecular science. This condemnation persists even though genetic modification allows much more targeted cross-breeding, its products are subjected to much more rigorous testing and safeguards than conventional breeding, and no genetically modified product has ever caused a single reported illness in humans.

Opposition to GMOs in agriculture persists even though thousands of lives have been saved and quality of life improved by the use of GMOs in human medicine. It persists even though genetic engineering techniques in agriculture have been used to dramatically reduce the use of synthetic fertilizers and chemicals in field crops such as corn and cotton, a reduction that seems compatible with the original core goals of the organic movement.

Organics Bad for Produce Consumption

Even though government food safety and health agencies all over the world recognize that food produced outside the organic straightjacket is highly desirable and perfectly safe to eat, the organic movement has used the myth of chemical-free, natural, organic products to cast aspersions on the quality and safety of the remaining produce supplies. Retailers are starting to compete by setting an unrealistically low bar on how chemical-free and natural food products can be.

Because organic products generally sell at a substantial premium, and provide a higher gross margin, retailers help to perpetuate the myth that organic products are superior and non-organic products are hazardous.

In his 2006 book, "The Undercover Economist", Tim Harford, a Financial Times columnist, notes that "The favored game at the moment has to be price-gouging the natural way, riding the bandwagon of organic food." Given the substantial price premiums, Harford notes, "We should not be surprised that supermarkets are taking the opportunity afforded by the organic food movement to zap consumers with well-aimed price increases." Such higher prices have become a serious obstacle to the enhancement of all produce consumption.

What is a Retailer to Do?

Retailers face a huge dilemma. Organic food products are now a profitable niche in their own right and have become a tool for wooing customers from competitors.

For specialty food chains like Whole Foods and Wild Oats, the virtuous reputation of organic foods has become a core part of their stores' appeal to consumers. They would have to make major changes in their business model and find new forms of virtuous consumption were they to admit that organic foods were no big deal.

However, for the major retailers like Tesco, Wal-Mart, Safeway, and Aldi, there is still time to rethink the merits of their recent conversion to the organic faith. There is still time for them to listen to the voices of reason that are starting to emerge about where organics, and the use of

chemicals, fit in the whole food spectrum. There is still time for them to reduce the pressure on their suppliers to meet standards that are impractical in the real world where farmers operate. It is time for them to stop misleading gullible consumers.

Few government agencies anywhere have been willing to re-assess the value of organic agriculture for fear of the environmental and organic lobbies. However, the U.K. Department of Food Resources and Agriculture, in its recent report on "Environmental Impacts of Food Production and Consumption in the UK", has tried to cut through the cant that surrounds much of the environmental demands on agriculture. More such independent studies are needed.

What is a Supplier to Do?

Suppliers also face a huge dilemma not of their making. Many have made major changes in their orchards and packing sheds to accommodate organic products. They are under pressure to expand their supplies of organic products. Some have struggled through all the transition requirements and are now making a profit. It makes sense for those suppliers to continue to qualify under the existing organic standards and to continue to serve that niche market.

However, they should be aware that much of the organic "faith" is just that, faith. Many arguments for the superiority of organic products are mere cant that could be exposed by science at any time.

What is a Consumer to Do?

After years of indoctrination, consumers may find it very difficult to accept the fact that the Emperor really has no clothes, that organic products may not, after all, be the answer to all of society's woes.

Says Tim Harford, "My recommendation, if you are convinced of the merits of organic food, is not to let food retailers exploit your enthusiasm: vote with your wallet by supporting any retailer - or direct supplier - who brings the price of organic and non-organic food closer together."

The Dose is The Poison

The organic movement brought a lot of good to agriculture in the past. However, like any chemical, too much of it can cause toxic consequences. It is past due time for a critical re-assessment.

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