



# MEDIA SHEETS

Student Reading

The Opinion Pages  
ROOM for DEBATE



SEPTEMBER 10, 2012

## Is Organic Food Worth the Expense?

### INTRODUCTION



Mike Blake/Reuters

A [recent study](#) by scientists at Stanford University found that fruits and vegetable labeled organic are, on average, no healthier than less expensive conventional produce, although they have lower levels of pesticide residue.

Are there other benefits that outweigh the [cost of organic food](#)? Is there a place for organic farming in a world with severe [food shortages and rising food prices](#)?

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### DEBATERS



#### Buying Organic Is a Personal Choice

MARION NESTLE, AUTHOR, "WHY CALORIES COUNT"

*I prefer not to be a guinea pig in a pesticide experiment. I'm fortunate to have the choice. We should do all we can to give everyone that choice.*



#### The Ecological Case Against Organics

CHRISTIE WILCOX, BLOGGER, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

*Until organic farming can rival the production output of conventional farming, its environmental cost is devastating.*



#### Focus on the Right Kind of Organic Farming

RAJ PATEL, INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

*Because the rural poor will be hit hardest by climate change, far from being a 'luxury for the rich,' organic farming may turn out to be a necessity.*



#### Food for the Wealthy, Not for the Poor

BJORN LOMBERG, COPENHAGEN CONSENSUS CENTER

*Most of the world needs cheaper food, so we should focus on higher yields, better access to fertilizer and well-regulated use of genetically enhanced crops.*



#### Lessons From the Farm

TOM PHILPOTT, MAVERICK FARMS

*Despite the claim that only it can "feed the world" as the climate warms and population grows, industrial agriculture has already reneged on its promises.*

### About the New York Times:

"The New York Times is dedicated to helping people understand the world through on-the-ground, expert and deeply reported independent journalism...Our mission is simple: We seek the truth and help people understand the world. This mission is rooted in our belief that great journalism has the power to make each reader's life richer and more fulfilling, and all of society stronger and more just." ("Company, NYT" n.d.)

### About the Room for Debate section of the Times:

"In Room for Debate, The Times invites knowledgeable outside contributors to discuss news events and other timely issues." (Room for Debate," N.d.).

The excerpts discussed here are from a discussion of the opinion pages of the New York Times (Is Organic Food Worth the Expense? (2012)



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# Focus on the Right Kind of Organic Farming



*Raj Patel, a fellow at the Institute for Food and Development Policy, is the author of "[The Value of Nothing](#)" and "[Stuffed and Starved](#)."*

SEPTEMBER 10, 2012

The countries worst hit by high food prices are food importers. Anything that can keep costs down will help feed the hungry. And the right kind of organic farming can help.

During the 2007-8 food crisis, the bruising cost of food was compounded by another problem -- fertilizer costs soared even more than the food itself. The problem hasn't gone away. Fertilizer prices are higher this year than last, and there's a great deal of uncertainty about where they'll go in the future.

There is, however, a great deal of certainty over the human cost of industrial pesticides and fertilizers. In the next decade, the United Nations Environmental Program estimates that pesticide-related health care will cost Africa \$90 billion. Agricultural chemical poisoning kills one million people a year, with millions more made severely ill by it.

This is to say nothing of the long-term environmental harm and other costs associated with pesticide use. Worse, agriculture is both perpetrator and victim of climate change. The fossil fuels used to make fertilizer contribute to agriculture's carbon footprint, yet the rural poor will be hit hardest by climate change.

We're encouraged to shrug off the environmental and social costs as necessary evils, unavoidable if we are to feed the world. We should shrug less. First, despite the acknowledged costs, one billion people are still malnourished. We all pay the price, but one in seven never see the benefits.

Second, there's mounting data from comprehensive peer-reviewed international studies that it's possible for certain kinds of organic agriculture to outperform conventional agriculture, with lower input costs and a smaller carbon footprint. Agroecological farming manages pests, soil fertility, water use, human social relations and biodiversity as part of a complex organic system. Beyond food, these systems also produce more fuel, fiber, fodder and pharmaceuticals than conventional agriculture.

Far from being a "luxury for the rich," organic farming may turn out to be a necessity not just for the poor, but for everyone.

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*Far from being a 'luxury for the rich,' organic farming may turn out to be a necessity not just for the poor, but for everyone.*

### About the Author, Raj Patel:

"Raj Patel is a research professor at the University of Texas at Austin's Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, a professor in the university's department of nutrition, and a research associate at Rhodes University, South Africa. He is the author of *Stuffed and Starved* and the *New York Times* bestselling *The Value of Nothing*, and the coauthor of *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*. A James Beard Foundation Leadership Award winner, he is the co-director of a groundbreaking documentary on climate change and the global food system, *The Ants and the Grasshopper*. He serves on the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems and has advised governments worldwide on the causes of and solutions to crises of sustainability."  
(Macmillan publishers, n.d).



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# Buying Organic Fruits and Vegetables Is a Personal Choice



*Marion Nestle, the Paulette Goddard professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University, is the author of "Why Calories Count: From Science to Politics." She blogs at [FoodPolitics.com](http://FoodPolitics.com) and is on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/mnestle).*

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Questions about organic food raise three issues: productivity, benefits and costs. Productivity is easy. Since the early 1980s, careful productivity studies conclude that organic yields are only slightly lower than conventional yields, and organic production leaves soils in much better shape — boding well for future productivity. The yield difference is too small to have much of an effect on world food supplies.

Next, benefits. If crops are grown without pesticides, they won't contaminate soil and water, foods will contain fewer pesticides, and people who eat organic foods will have lower levels in their bodies. The Stanford study and others confirm all this. Critics of organics say: "So what. Pesticides are safe." They point out that nobody has ever died from eating industrially produced broccoli. Although science does not presently demonstrate long-term harm from eating pesticide-treated vegetables, pesticides are demonstrably harmful to farm workers and to "nontarget" wildlife, and they accumulate in soils for ages. If pesticides were all that benign, the government wouldn't need to regulate them, but it does.

The Stanford study made a big deal about nutrients, but nutrients are not the point. The point of organic production is its effects on the health of people and the planet. The investigators did not examine the overall health impact of organics, no doubt because such studies are difficult to conduct and interpret. For one thing, people who buy organics tend to be better educated and wealthier — characteristics that track with good health anyway.

That leaves the cost question. Organics cost more because they require greater amounts of hand labor. Are they worth it? Personally, I prefer not to be a guinea pig in a long-term pesticide experiment. I'm also fortunate to have the choice.

We should be doing all we can to give everyone else the same choice.

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*I choose not to be a guinea pig in a long-term pesticide experiment. We should do all we can to give everyone that choice.*

### About the Author, Marion Nestle:

"Marion Nestle is Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, Emerita, at New York University. She earned a Ph.D. in molecular biology and an M.P.H. in public health nutrition from the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of six prize-winning books: *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (2002); *Safe Food: The Politics of Food Safety* (2003); *What to Eat* (2006); *Why Calories Count: From Science to Politics*, with Dr. Malden Nesheim (2012); *Eat, Drink Vote: An Illustrated Guide to Food Politics* (2013); and *Soda Politics: Taking on Big Soda (and Winning)* in 2015." (NYU, n.d.)

<https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/09/10/is-organic-food-worth-the-expense/buying-organic-fruits-and-vegetables-is-a-personal-choice>