

THE EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD PROJECT

WHAT IS ORGANIC?

Summary: Many of us are familiar with the term “organic”. But even if we can define it, we don’t always take the time to explore what “organic” represents. In this lesson, students will explore and discuss their understanding of what “organic” is, and what it represents to them.

Time: 60 minutes

Teacher Notes:

- This lesson emphasizes an open discussion. For tips, suggestions, and resources for leading open discussions please see the documents: [Mindsets for Open Discussions](#) and [Facilitating Open Discussions](#).
- The “READ” sections of this lesson plan can be used as talking points or a script to introduce activities. Please note, these sections simply provide brief introductions to the topics. We recommend using your experiences to add more information and context to the topics being covered.
- If you are teaching this lesson in the garden, we suggest completing the sections as a whole class or in small groups. The garden is a great place for discussion-based lessons.
- This lesson is part of Edible Schoolyard Project’s [Understanding Organic](#) curriculum and is the first lesson in the “core lessons” of the curriculum.

References:

What is Organic Food? (2012, November 6th). *Epipheo*. [Video] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhIZWhJtY8w>.

Farmer’s Market Finder (n.d). *Ecology Center*. [Map] Retrieved from <https://ecologycenter.org/fmfinder/>.

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WHAT IS ORGANIC?

Vocabulary:

- **Genetically modified:** a plant or animal that has had genes added to it. Sometimes will be labelled as, “produced with genetic engineering”
- **Pesticides:** something used to kill insects, weeds, and fungi
- **Synthetic:** not naturally derived
- **Antibiotics:** drugs used to kill bacteria—sometimes used to make animals gain weight faster
- **Hormones:** natural chemicals that plants and animals use to control their functions — sometimes synthetic hormones are used to make animals grow faster or produce more milk

WRITE: When you hear the word “organic”, what comes to mind for you? Create a word association map on a piece of paper (see image below for ideas on how to start your word map). Describe the personal associations, thoughts, and feelings you have on the word **organic**. Remember there are no right or wrong answers for this activity. Write whatever comes to your mind!

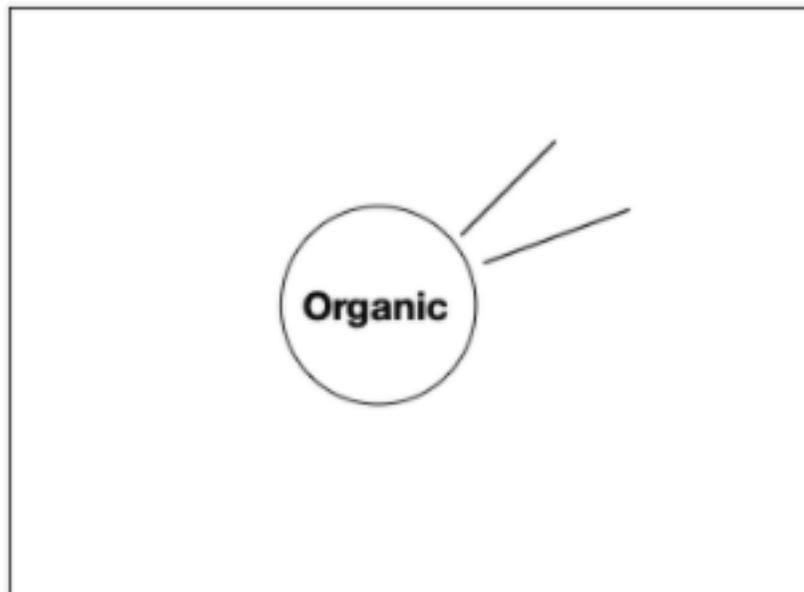


Image one: Word Map Example

DISCUSS: Discuss what you wrote. If you are completing this activity with a class, check in with your teacher. They will instruct you on what to do next. If you are completing this lesson on your own, discuss what you wrote with a family member or friend.



WHAT IS ORGANIC?

READ: “Organic” can refer to certified organic food, and to certified organic farming practices that are designed around protecting the environment. For foods to be certified organic, they must be produced in adherence to strict rules that govern the farming methods and materials used. You’ll learn more about those regulations in the lesson titled [Exploring Organic Certification](#). However, when people say “organic”, they don’t always mean certified organic. “Organic” can also refer to sustainable farming practices broadly. “Organic” means many different things to many people.

EXPLORE: Look over the information presented in the [Infographic on Organic](#) and list three things you found interesting:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

READ: In the next activity you will agree or disagree with a statement about organic (see page 4. and 5. for prompts and statements on organic). The goal is not to test or prove your knowledge, but to develop an understanding of your perceptions of organic and how they compare to truths about it.

DO: Whether you are in a classroom or a garden, designate one side of the space as “Agree/True” and the other side as “Disagree/Untrue”. The space in between is “No Opinion/Neutral.” Print out one copy of the list of prompts and statements that is included at the end of this lesson plan.

Either the teacher or a student volunteer will read a prompt and ask students to move to indicate whether they agree or disagree. After everyone has had a chance to move, read the clarifying statement for that prompt. Then repeat the exercise with the next prompt. As you listen and move to indicate your agreement or disagreement, remember to be aware of your reactions and think about what comes up for you.

REFLECT: Reflect either in writing or in conversation with your class, a peer, or a family member. In your reflection, answer the following questions:

- Did this lesson reveal any misconceptions (something you thought was true that turned out to not be) or misunderstandings about organic for you or your classmates? What were they?
- Has your understanding of or attitude towards organic changed at all? Why?
- What questions do you still have about organic?

ANSWER: In your own words, define organic.

Student and Parent Notes:

- Buying organic supports the health of farmworkers and the environment. You can buy organic food at farmer’s markets, produce markets, and supermarkets.
 - Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a model in which consumers pay farmers directly for the food they produce. See if there are any Organic CSAs near you that you could join!
 - Buying from farmers at farm stands, through CSAs, and at farmer’s markets supports farmers more than buying at supermarkets because 100% of your dollars go directly to them!
 - Many farmer’s markets accept and match SNAP/EBT funds. This means that you can get \$2 worth of food for every SNAP/EBT dollar you spend. Here is a map of California farmer’s markets that accept or match SNAP/EBT funds.

Prompts and Statements About Organic

Organic is better for the environment.

True - *Organic food uses fewer toxic chemicals and fossil-fuel derived fertilizers than non-organic agriculture. Organic agriculture has a number of environmental benefits.*

Organic is better for mitigating climate change.

True - *Eating certified organic means less fossil fuel derived fertilizers and greenhouse gases. However, eating fewer animal-based products is the largest climate impact choice you can make with your diet.*

Organic certification is costly and time consuming.

True - *Getting certified organic requires following all the rules, inspections, three years of careful record keeping, and fees to the certification agency.*

If it's not organic it is not sustainable.

False - *Many farms use sustainable growing practices but do not have organic certification. If you care about sustainable agriculture, it is good to know your farmer and how they grow.*

Organic food tastes worse.

False - *Many chefs recognize organic food as tasting better than non-organic food. However, some brands make organic versions of products that are also marketed as healthier and contain less fat or salt than the typical version of their product. These branded, packaged, organic products may not taste as good because of those recipe changes, not because they are made with organic ingredients.*

Organic means small farms and family owned.

False - *Organic certification can be granted to small family farms and enormous corporate farms alike. Many certified organic products are grown by large agribusinesses and there are many non-organic small family farms.*

Organic means local.

False - *Organic farms exist all over the world. The certified organic apple you buy at the grocery store might be from across the world! If you want to buy locally grown food pay attention to the country-of-origin label - which is required on all produce sold in the US.*

Prompts and Statements About Organic Continued

Natural means the same as organic.

False - *The term “natural” is completely unregulated, meaning anyone can use it to advertise anything. This is unlike certified organic which has strict rules and sustainable practices that must be followed. “Natural” can be used to mislead consumers into believing that a company’s products are environmentally friendly.*

Organic is (more) expensive.

True and false - *It’s complicated. Certified organic produce is often slightly more expensive compared to non-organic versions of the same item within the same store. However, by buying direct from farmers at farmers markets or through a CSA, certified organic food can be purchased for prices similar to non-organic food.*

Organic is accessible.

True and false - *It’s complicated. Certified organic food is more accessible now than ever before. Organic food is available at most every grocery and big box store across the country. However, cost is part of access and sometimes the price premiums on organic foods make them inaccessible to people.*