

1-12-05 Ann Arbor News “Your World” column submission:

## Shop and grow “organic”

More and more we are seeing the word “organic” on labels—what exactly does this mean?

Currently, food that is sold as organic is regulated by the USDA National Organic Program and must be grown under a certain set of guidelines ([www.ams.usda.gov/nop/](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/)). But many products are made up of more than one food. The percentage of a product that is organically grown will determine its labeling, per federal regulations.

It is interesting to note that products that are labeled “Organic” can legally contain up to 5% non-organic ingredients—including added sulfites, nitrates, and nitrites—while only those that specify “100% Organic” are made totally without non-organic ingredients. And a product that is labeled, “Made with organic ingredients,” can be composed of up to 30% non-organic components.

The health benefits of organically-grown food may be due to more than just the absence of pesticides. According to a recent New York Times editorial, plants grown organically have higher levels of phenolic compounds (anti-oxidants), which defend the plant against insect attacks.

Environmental health is another reason to seek out organically-grown food. For instance, the fields of California strawberries and Florida tomatoes are commonly fumigated with methyl bromide, which is an ozone-depleting chemical. And the pesticide imidacloprid, widely-used worldwide, is highly toxic to honeybees.

You can buy organic products in stores and farmers’ markets, or you can join a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm, which provides fresh organic produce throughout the season to members who pay an annual subscription fee. There are four CSA’s in Washtenaw County—see [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org) for a CSA farm near you.

Or you can grow your own organic produce, in your yard or in a nearby community garden (“Project Grow” maintains eight of them—see [www.comnet.org/projectgrow](http://www.comnet.org/projectgrow)).

A new educational opportunity being offered this year is the Project Grow Organic Gardener Certification program. It will teach organic gardening and landscaping in evening classes at WCC (Washtenaw County Community College). Five modules are offered to choose from, between March 3<sup>rd</sup> and April 5<sup>th</sup>. Those who attend all five, and pass a final assessment, will receive certification which verifies completion, similar to the Master Gardener Program.

Here are some examples of areas that will be covered:

- Composting— It is estimated that 90% of all garden failures are caused by poor

soil, and that 1/5 teaspoon of rich soil contains over 100 million microorganisms (bacteria, fungi, and others), providing a beneficial growing environment.

- Companion planting—Certain flowers can discourage pests and attract beneficial bugs to your vegetable garden, such as the praying mantis that eats other insects voraciously.
- Organic lawn care—In the U.S. we apply an estimated 70 million pounds of pesticides yearly on our 45 million lawns. The run-off pollutes our groundwater and waterways, and can harm non-target organisms.

For more information about the new organic gardening certification, call WCC's Department of Lifelong Education at (734)677-5027, or search "organic gardening" at [www.wccnet.org](http://www.wccnet.org).

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