

Local and Organic Farming in Florida

Danielle Treadwell, state extension specialist, ddtreadw@ufl.edu

Nola Wilson, Marion County small farm and livestock agent

Larry Halsey, Jefferson County extension director

Buy local! Buy organic! These phrases have become very popular in our communities. Organic food is now sold in more than 73 percent of all retail grocery stores in the United States and more than 53 percent of consumers report purchasing organic products at least occasionally. In 2007, organic food products generated more than \$16 billion in domestic sales, and the organic industry continues to grow at a steady rate.

The production and sales of organic products are regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program, and are verified by independent third-party certifiers. This process ensures that all products labeled and sold in the United States as "certified organic" meet or exceed the national organic standards.

Organic producers are required to follow specific production criteria to ensure soil is managed in a way that prevents soil erosion, promotes and enhances soil biological diversity, and increases soil organic matter. In addition, pests are managed using methods that minimize the use of pesticides. Farmers use strategies that encourage beneficial insects and bees, and avoid practices that disrupt natural predators, or result in a flush of weeds.

Florida has more than 130 certified organic operations distributed across the state. Most of these organic farmers sell a wide variety of fruit, vegetables, herbs, flowers and other products directly to the consumer at farmers' markets, roadside stands, or through advanced sales (community supported agriculture). Some farmers sell locally to restaurants, schools and grocery stores.

Demand for U.S. organic products is increasing faster than the current supply and this has resulted in a need for farmers who have the desire and skills to farm organically.

Consumers purchase local, organic food for a variety of reasons including:

* Fresh-market fruits and vegetables produced and consumed locally are fresher and more nutritious than when harvested and shipped great distances;

- * Organic farming uses sustainable farming practices such as crop rotation, biological controls and limited use of pesticides, thus preserving our state's natural resources;
- * Organic products that are processed (salsas, jams, etc.) are free from genetically modified ingredients, artificial colors, artificial flavors and preservatives;
- * Irradiation of organic produce is prohibited;
- * Organic livestock are raised without using preventative antibiotics or growth-promoting hormones;
- * Buying local organic food is good for Florida's economy.

Find information about organic certification at the IFAS Small Farms and Alternative Crops Web site, <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>. Or you can contact your local county extension agent for information and assistance in meeting organic certification requirements, and for local markets for locally produces farm products.

On Aug. 1-2, 2009, the first Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference will be held at Osceola Heritage Park in Kissimmee. The event will feature exhibitors, educational sessions and more. All Florida farmers are invited to attend. Visit the conference Web site at <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>. For information on conference sponsorship or being an exhibitor, contact Bob Hochmuth, 386-362-1725 or bobhoch@ufl.edu.



Photo 1: Florida's organic farmers improve soil quality by growing cover crops, such as those shown here at the UF/IFAS Organic Research Unit in Citra -- winter annual crimson clover, cereal rye and hairy vetch. The state has more than 130 certified organic producers, who raise a variety of fruits, vegetables, herbs, flowers and other items. Photo by Johann Scholberg



Photo 2: Native bees are important pollinators for Florida's crops, and organic farmers encourage them by providing food sources and habitat year-round. Here, a bee visits Sunn hemp, a legume cover crop, at Rosie's Organic Farm in Gainesville. Photo by Danielle Treadwell