

GET THE FACTS

ABOUT ORGANICS IN ALBERTA



ORGANIC-WASHING: WHAT'S BEHIND THE LABEL ON YOUR FOOD?

Walking through grocery stores, you've seen food with marketing phrases like "all-natural," "sustainably grown," "pasture raised," "hormone free," etc. on the packaging. You've probably added some of these to your cart and felt good about buying them. These words all give an impression that the food you're buying is healthier or better than the alternative without these labels. It makes them sound more... well, organic, right? This is what is referred to as "organic-washing," using descriptive words that imply a product embodies one or many of the benefits associated with the Canada Organic label.

First, let's talk about what it means to be organic. Organic is more than just how you grow food. It's actually how you grow, produce, and process food.

Organic is based on an ecological method of agriculture production that respects the natural environment. Certified organic farmers focus on enhancing the health and vitality of the soil, preserving biodiversity, promoting animal welfare and preserving the ecological integrity of our environment. And no synthetic fertilizers, synthetic pesticides or genetically modified organisms are permitted in organics.

HOW DOES ORGANIC-WASHING WORK?

There are no mandatory third party certifications in place for most of these organic-washing labels. What does this mean to you, the consumer? The food you purchase may have been produced in a very different way than you think it is. Let's consider the term "pasture raised" as an example of a label that finds its way onto many beef products. What image does this invoke in your mind? Most marketers want you to envision a healthy beef animal eating fresh grass on a

sunny afternoon in a beautiful prairie meadow. They may also want you to hold this vision of the animal's carefree life right up until the animal is transported to a humane meat processing facility before being prepared and packaged.

The reality is that all beef cows in Canada spend a portion of their lives in a pasture, but most steers will only spend a few weeks on pasture and finish their lives in feedlots on a ration of grain that's been optimized to maximum weight gain. While consumers can debate which is better, grain finished or grass finished, where things get a bit complicated with a label like "pasture raised" is what does this really mean? Since there's no third party certification and neither Canada's Food and Drug Act or Safe Food for Canadians Act specify when or how the label is to be used, consumers may erroneously assume the animal has spent the majority of its life in that meadow.

This may be good marketing, but if you take a closer look at how a company can apply these "marketing labels," you'll find that while most of the companies likely practice what they claim, and Canada's Food and Drug Act helps, very few of the labels are verified by third party certifiers. This is in stark contrast to the Canada Organic label. In Alberta, the certified Canada Organic label erases any doubt regarding the processes and products that have gone into your food. Only companies that meet national organic legislation and processes can have the organic label applied. When you see the Canadian Organic logo, you have assurances as to how your food was grown, raised, and processed.

Now, let's take a closer look at what it means to be an organic producer, and why it's important to pay attention to the labels.



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1. Know the Difference Between Regulated & Unregulated Terms

2. Do Some Extra Research

A company that is certified organic won't just have a "organic-washed" slogan; they'll have sustainable practices too. When you pick up a new product, do a little digging. See if the company actually practices what they preach behind the scenes by researching them online, checking their reviews on Google Reviews, Yelp, Facebook, etc. or even reaching out to the producer to see what their definition of a claim may be.

3. Look Past the Packaging

Packaging is usually where you'll find organic-washing. This includes everything from the images and slogans you see on a product, to the colour of the package.

Remember, packaging style doesn't necessarily make a product organic, healthy, or sustainable. Some signs of organic-washing may include:

- Phrases like "all-natural," "green," "sustainably farmed," "sustainably produced," or similar claims;
- Images of trees or plants;
- Unusual or excessive use of the colour green.

These can be pretty good indicators of organic-washing. If you see them, you might want to read the label and do some extra research to make sure there's action behind the beautiful packaging.

4. Look for the Certified Organic Label

We know, we've mentioned it MANY times, but this is the easiest way to ensure your food is produced and processed to a verifiable standard! The certified organic label guarantees your food has been grown or raised with regulated and monitored sustainable practices.

ORGANIC? NATURAL? WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Thanks to Alberta's new legislation, we know that the Canada Organic label has real weight behind it. Certified organic farmers in Canada and Alberta have to follow certain practices to get their certification and failure to do so can see it quickly revoked.

Organic Certification

When in doubt, just look out for the Canada Organic label on the product's packaging. Organic certification guarantees that your products

are without a doubt organic – not using unregulated organic-washing terms, even if many of them are true.

Certification is about far more than just how your food is grown, though. When a product has organic certification, you know that it has met organic standards at every point of its journey to your plate, from growing to processing to distribution to marketing.

All certified organic products in Alberta have to meet the standards set out by the federal guidelines. These standards include:

- Annual inspections by a certified third party;
- A full review of the substances and methods used during production;
- Restrictions on the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemicals;
- Stating as a percentage how organic the components of a product is from 70%-100%.

Thanks to the Supporting Alberta's Local Food Sector Act (SALFSA), all products that claim to be organic in Alberta must be certified in accordance with the federally regulated Canadian Organic Standards.

CHECK YOUR LABELS TWICE!

Organic-washing is confusing. It's very easy to assume the labels you see are backed up in practice, but that's not always the case. So the next time you see an "all-natural" product, read a little further. You might be surprised by what you find (or don't find!).

If you want to know exactly what goes into your food, you can always keep an eye out for the Canada Organic label. After all, in Alberta, it's the law!

CANADA'S FOOD IS SAFE

Does this mean you shouldn't trust food with organic-washing labels that are not certified organic? Of course not, fortunately for Canadian consumers, all food produced and sold within Canada is held to some of the highest standards in the world and regulations are in place to ensure all of our food is safe. Food also has to be labelled in a way that is not false or misleading.

WAYS TO LEARN MORE

Do you want to learn more about what organically-grown means in Alberta? Would you value monthly updates on Alberta's local organic sector – including legislation, farming practices, GMO regulation, and more? Now you can receive it the way you want to:

- **By Email** – Become a member of Organic Alberta and we'll deliver our latest article directly into your inbox.
- **By Facebook Messenger** – Be the first to read the latest information.
- **By Browser Notification** – Receive convenient notifications of new content the next time you're online.

