

GET THE FACTS

ABOUT ORGANICS IN ALBERTA



HOW DO ORGANIC FARMERS IN ALBERTA GROW FOOD?

What's on your plate this week? If it's organic, it's likely to be from the produce or bakery departments.

According to recent research by the Canada Organic Trade Association, Alberta organic shoppers are most likely to buy fruits and veggies, with 96% of organic shoppers reporting a purchase in that category.

Close behind are breads and grains (80%), meat and poultry (71%) and dairy products (70%). Not all the buying is going on in the fresh food aisles, though. Baby food, coffee, and ready-to-eat cereals were some specific top choices in packaged organic foods.

If you're one of many Albertans making organic purchases at the grocery store, farmers market, or local shop, you probably want to know exactly what that organic label means. What's the process that your food followed to get from field to plate? And is there any guarantee that it's made that way every time? Let's find out!

ALL YOUR ORGANIC QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY A LOCAL ALBERTA ORGANIC GRAIN FARMER

We can't be everywhere and know everything, so most of us don't think too hard about where our food comes from. What goes on in the fields? What are farmers using on their crops? What changes when a farmer begins producing organically?

To get to the bottom of what organic means and to answer all your questions, we asked a certified organic farmer from Alberta.

MEET STEVEN SNIDER OF LITTLE RED HEN MILLS

Steven is a fourth generation farmer on his family farm in New Norway, Alberta, which has been a certified organic farm for 33 years – long

before there was any market for organic products. For Steven and his family, it was a lifestyle choice to go organic. Plus, it was a more sustainable arrangement for their family farm.

"The organic food production model goes a long way to making small family farms sustainable and I think that's key." – Steven Snider

As an expert in organic farming in Alberta, Steven knows a lot about what it takes to become a certified organic producer, what goes into the food, and what the challenges are in organic farming. Here are the answers to some of the questions you might have for Steven:

WHAT CAN ALBERTA CERTIFIED ORGANIC FARMERS USE ON THEIR CROPS?

Organic farmers are very restricted in their use of herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides. Even fertilizers can be restricted based on what is in them. In many cases, farmers have to use distinct techniques and farming practices to combat weeds, pests, fungus, and malnutrition.

"We are a guarantee, not necessarily of purity, but of the production practices of growing that food."

WILL MY CERTIFIED ORGANIC PRODUCTS BE 100% CHEMICAL FREE?

Organic farmers do their best to keep chemicals away from their crops and produce. Unfortunately, Mother Nature has her own mind about what goes where.

While organic farmers will never purposefully add these chemicals to there is always a chance of chemical residue moving into the crops from wind, rain, snow, or other natural events.



GET MORE FACTS AT
ORGANICALBERTA.ORG/GETTHEFACTS/



According to Steven, farmers do their best to mitigate those conditions and protect their crops from this residue. However, it's impossible for nearly any grower to guarantee conditions out of their control.

CAN ALBERTA CERTIFIED ORGANIC FARMERS USE GMO SEEDS?

The answer to the GMO (genetically modified organisms) question is "absolutely not."

According to the World Health Organization: *"Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) can be defined as organisms (i.e. plants, animals or microorganisms) in which the genetic material (DNA) has been altered in a way that does not occur naturally by mating and/or natural recombination."*

There's a wide range of what GMO can mean, Steven says. From crossing two species right up to artificially splicing DNA, GMO means changing the genetic structure of a plant. But there's no question on what the stance is for certified organics in Alberta, regardless of "how much" modification has been done to a plant. Alberta organic farmers are stringently banned from using GMO seeds of any kind.

HOW FARMERS COMBAT WEEDS AND CROP ISSUES WITHOUT CHEMICALS OR GMOS

All farmers – organic or not – face very specific challenges when it comes to growing crops. Taking care of pests and weeds and providing excellent nutrients for the plants are two important issues. Different types of farmers deal with these issues in different ways.

For example, many GMO seeds grow into plants that are resistant to herbicides. In other words, you'll be able to kill off the weeds with herbicide without killing the actual plant. In Alberta, where Canada thistle is a major threat to crops grown in the prairies and rangelands, GMO seeds combined with herbicides offer a solution. However, organic farmers in Alberta are not allowed to use GMO seeds or herbicides on their crops. Without those options, organic farmers have to combat issues in different ways.

Another major problem Steven often faces at Little Red Hen Mills is keeping soil nutrients up. To keep his crops growing well, Steven has partnered with an organic poultry operation that provides fertilizer that meets organic standards.

"We can't be reactive; we have to be proactive. The work you do today you may not see for 2-3 years. Rotations, 3-4-5 rotations, not cropping the same crops on the same fields, so we have fewer issues because of biodiversity." - Steven Snider

Here are a few ways farmers can combat weeds, malnutrition, pests and disease in their crops without the use of chemicals:

- Crop rotation
- Using compost and green manure
- Tillage methods and timing
- Biodiversity

WHO CAN GET CERTIFIED IN ALBERTA?

Any Alberta farmer or producer can go through the process to become a certified organic producer. Each applicant must be willing to follow legislation and guidelines, undergo inspections, and repeat the certification process annually.

WHAT IS THE ORGANIC CERTIFICATION PROCESS IN ALBERTA?

The initial certification process takes three years. Typically, this is how long it takes for the land to be free of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers that were previously used on the site. Here's what the process looks like:

1. The producer submits an application to the certifying body
2. The certifying body reviews the application
3. An independent third-party inspector goes directly to the producer's site and completes a report
4. The report is submitted to the certifying body
5. If the report matches compliance standards, the certifying body issues a certificate. The certificate lists the specific products that are organically produced.
6. The process repeats annually

It's important to note that certification isn't a one-time process. It's an ongoing commitment that's regularly monitored. If a farmer does not pass inspections, the certification can be revoked.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY BUYING CHOICES?

According to Steven, it's not about what labels you do or don't choose at the grocery store; it's about the relationship between growers – conventional and organic – and consumers.

Remember that peace of mind comes from knowing where and how your food was made. All Canadian farmed food is farmed, produced, and packaged under some of the world's highest standards. Just like organic farmers, conventional farmers have to follow rules that guide farming practices and monitor food quality. Once you have the facts about how your food is grown, it's up to you to decide what's right for you.

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.

