

What's "organic" mean anyways?

BY JONN KARSSEBOOM

I couldn't help feel a bit defensive because the way she put the question to me meant, in fact, I was lying.

"I asked you when I bought my lettuce if these were organic." She began nicely. "You told me yes, but I noticed there wasn't any label telling me it was "Organic" and when I called your grower they told me it wasn't."

I did recall her question to me when she stopped in the nursery a few days prior and as she was picking up her small six-pack of romaine lettuce I proudly explained to her then how ALL of our veggie selections were indeed "organic".

Now a few days later she was back with the same six pack in hand, a bit droopier for the travels, waving the floppy leaves for emphasis. "I'd like to return THESE because I found some TRULY ORGANIC lettuce elsewhere."

I knew she wasn't taking the precious time in her day for the simple \$2.99 return. She was too thoughtful and kind and polite and it was easily apparent she had done her homework. She had come in to set the record straight.

In essence, if it didn't have "Organic" on the label it truly wasn't organic. No matter what kind of explanation I cared to offer.

The accusation stung. I knew our grower well. I knew exactly the growing conditions all of the vegetable plants we sold. I knew the path from seed to the final step at check out. Not one of our vegetables had been sprayed with any sort of pesticide. I knew them to be so completely safe I'd feed them to my own children. (I do.)

But yet my customer had a very good point.

What she was really referring to when she asked if our veggies were "Organic" was really if our veggies were "Certified Organic". It's a regulated label by the United States Department of Agriculture (and quite a few other independent groups) in fact to help consumers protect themselves from overzealous marketers of everything we may eat (or grow.)



It's an excellent program of which I fully support. Go to a big city and buy from people I don't know and I too would hope there's someone held accountable that what the label says in fact is the truth.

But sometimes just because the label doesn't say it, doesn't mean it isn't necessarily the reverse either. In fact, as far as your local nursery industry is concerned, being organic is the most cost effective way to grow plants. Spraying with pesticides in other words, isn't cheap. (Incidentally, "Certified Organic" doesn't necessarily mean that your vegetables weren't sprayed either. It just means that if they were sprayed it was with chemicals from an approved list.)

Speaking of costs it's also worth noting that "Certified Organic" vegetable starts tend, on average, to cost more- often three or four times more. It's an understandable trust tax paid for the extra work of documenting (and proving) all of the stages of growth from seed to retailer.

There are of course other qualifications to meet other than NOT spraying with chemicals to be certified organic. Namely it's the types of seeds and soils and fertilizers used. Those tend to be much more minor issues however where human safety is concerned. (Side note: Organic can also mean "Earth Friendly".) Pesticide use is still by far the primary concern.

In the end, when it came to the six-pack of romaine lettuce, I'm glad she stopped to question my personal claim to "Organic". I didn't meet her requirements that day and since then, I've come to accept it. For her part her refund wasn't in vain. A few days later I was called across the nursery by a pair of vegetable shoppers.

"Hey, are your vegetables organic?" they asked.

"Tell me what organic means to you," I questioned this time. It was the beginning of a good conversation indeed.



Jonn Karsseboom believes that the best conversations often happen outside in the garden. You may also reach him www.thegardencorner.com.