[IMAGE]

Go ORGANIC!

Grow Your Own Garden of Good Food

By David Barnes, PhD

Let's face facts: As a nation, most of the food we eat is of poor nutritional quality. We have come to value the quantity of our food supply more than its quality. More than that, for the sake of convenience and cost, we limit our consumption of whole foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables and instead turn to refined, processed, pre-packaged, and pre-made foods. You can imagine that in the course of these foods being made, valuable nutrients are left behind.

Whole foods, as the name suggests, have a whole lot more to offer than processed, refined foods, and the healthiest whole foods of them all are *organic* foods. Today, finding organic and less refined foods is becoming easier and less expensive, making it a viable option when pursuing our universal goal to maintain health.

Creating an Environment Ripe for Good Health

Organic foods are grown or raised (meat and dairy) in an environment free from anything artificial including chemical fertilizers, pesticides, weed killers, drugs, antibiotics and hormones. Organic food is produced in a manner that helps retain powerful nutritive value and avoids unnecessary exposure to potential toxins - a double-whammy of health benefits.

Go ORGANIC! - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Conventional (nonorganic) food production takes advantage of artificial aids to produce very high quantities of uniform product. In this inorganic system, less care is taken to maintain soil health, which means plants have fewer resources to draw upon during growth. Scientists have studied whether this means there are nutritional differences between organic and conventional foods (primarily plants); the results are unclear. However, what we *do* know is that there is less risk of exposure to the chemicals used in conventional food production when you eat organic.

One of the easiest ways to purchase organic food is locally from farmer's markets, family farms and food co-ops, many of which use organic production methods. If you like the idea of consuming an apple grown

down the street, picked at the peak of its ripeness without post-harvest pesticides, and that didn't travel thousands of miles from another country (which may or may not have appropriate pesticide regulations), then a farmer's market, farm or co-op is an excellent resource.

Today's organic food market is expanding rapidly; organic options are readily available in health food stores, supermarkets, and even from online distributors. However, while availability is increasing and costs are coming down, it can still be a challenge to find a good selection in the organic food aisle. This is where you can take the initiative and advantage of a few square feet of sun-drenched window sill to grow your own.

Growing Your Own Garden of Good Food

There is probably no better way to gain access to the healthy organic foods your body craves most than by growing them yourself. More and more people are getting on the home-gardening bandwagon as food, fuel and energy costs continue to rise. Home gardening, especially organic gardening, can be a great help in avoiding the consumption of manufactured foods and offset some of the cost concerns with organic produce. Some of the most popular homegrown organic foods include the following:

- Herbs (peppermint, dill, chives) and greens (arugula, lettuce, spinach)
- Vegetables (tomatoes, chile peppers, cucumbers, zucchini, green beans)
- Fruit plants (raspberries, strawberries, blackberries)

For plants, healthy nutrition begins with the most basic elements - sun, water, fertile soil and perhaps a green thumb. These elements and a few seeds are all you need to produce nutrient-packed organic foods at home. For your organic garden, first pick a sunny spot. You can grow a variety of organic foods, like salad greens and herbs, simply by tending to a patch of lawn in the back yard or a couple of planted pots or boxes on your patio or balcony. As long as the area gets a lot of sunlight, you should have many growing options. Keep it simple. Organic gardening isn't necessarily about flair, but rather function.

Go ORGANIC! Family - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Next, tend to the soil. The best soil for organic growing is dark, rich, crumbly top soil enriched with natural fertilizers, preferably manure or compost. By regularly feeding the soil, you are providing more food for the plants you will eventually eat. Keep the soil, seeds and plants watered, weeded, and protected using natural means. This means cultivating, mowing, hand-weeding or covering crops instead of using herbicides for weed control, as well as using

natural plant oils, soaps and beneficial bugs to control harmful pests. Encouraging bees, butterflies and other wildlife to visit your organic plants and garden is actually essential because they help maintain the natural harmony and balance necessary for organic growing.

Make sure to plant a variety of seeds - after all, variety is the spice of life! Diversity is key when it comes to organic gardening. Strict organic rules require certified organic seed, but regardless of your personal preference for seeds, check first to ensure they are expected to grow well in the climate and region where you live.

Finally, pay attention to what works in your garden and what doesn't. In northern regions, it will just not be possible for most to grow crops outside in the winter, so determine what will grow well in a few strategically placed window boxes and enjoy your bounty when the snow arrives.

Don't get discouraged if you aren't growing the world's biggest tomato or tallest stalk of peppermint. Maybe all you can get to grow at first is a few lettuce leaves for salads or sandwich toppings and some of your favorite herbs to spice up your cooking. Don't expect too much from your little garden. Try to enjoy the organic gardening experience itself and other health benefits it brings, like exercise, time spent outdoors in the fresh air, and a sense of well being. Try to think of the chemical-free, vitamin-filled, fresh, natural foods it yields as an added bonus.

Getting Your Organic Groove on (in the Kitchen)

With any recipe, the quality of the ingredients you use affects the quality of the final product. After growing a few organic goodies in your garden, it's time to harvest them and prepare them to nourish your body. The great thing about growing your own organic ingredients is it allows for control over the quality of your food. Being able to pick or harvest your food as soon as it reaches peak ripeness - which is when it has its highest nutrient value, best color, and most flavor - is one of the greatest benefits to growing your own garden.

Once harvested, use your homegrown ingredients to create healthy, tasty meals and snacks. Aim to preserve the nutrients and wholesome nature of the food. Eat produce fresh and raw, soon after picking it. Consider freezing or canning fruits and veggies preserving their precious nutrients for storage and use later in recipes. This is especially important because some items only come around at certain times of the year and often in great abundance. (Can I offer you another zucchini?)

Become familiar with the best ways to handle, extract, and package ingredients to retain the vital nutrients in your homegrown foods. For tips and advice on preparing and cooking organic dishes check out a few cookbooks or online communities that focus on creating healthy food combinations using organic foods - many also provide important information and helpful tricks to cooking healthily with organic ingredients.

Remember, if the idea of organic gardening and growing your own food seems more like a chore than a blessing, try to remember all the benefits - and the next thing you know, you'll be sitting down to a delicious meal made with your own favorite, healthy, homegrown foods.

Home gardening isn't for everyone. Some may ask, "What do I do if I don't have a green thumb?" or "How do I fit this into my busy schedule?" Life is a balance and finding the right mix will differ from person to person. The important thing is to find ways to incorporate healthy food choices whether they are organic or not into your family's diet. When shopping, consider purchasing 10 percent of your food from the organic section or aim to prepare and serve one meal a day using as many organic ingredients as possible.

Back to Basics

Perhaps one of the most health-conscious decisions we can make is to try to get "back to basics" as much as possible. Increasing your consumption of organic foods can contribute to this effort. This means selecting foods high in fiber and low in cholesterol such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Not only do these whole foods provide greater nutritive value, but they also offer less exposure to unnatural ingredients that can be damaging to health.

All About Organic

To learn more about the health benefits of organic foods, visit the Organic Consumers Association Web site (www.organicconsumers.org). Numerous online resources provide easy recipes you can make at home; here are a few to get you started on your journey toward the organic lifestyle and better health:

www.organickitchen.com
www.recipes.organic.org
www.seabreezed.com/recipes.php
www.easybakingtips.com

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