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Archives Food

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Chicago area green markets growing, but are not all organic

But don't assume everything is organic



By Pat Terry
July 22, 2009

“Green” used to mean a color – perhaps a dark carrot stem, a lighter Bibb lettuce, a celery green shade or sage green.

Today, it denotes environmentally sound products and processes aimed at protecting the environment and our health; they range from organic and sustainable farming to biodegradable, non-toxic and non-polluting products.

When I discovered Chicago's Green City Market, founded by Abby Mandel in 1999, I assumed that “green” in the title meant organic and that the fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, cheese and eggs were free of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, antibiotics, growth hormones and genetic modification.

Talking with friends made it clear that many believed all farmers markets are organic.

But we were wrong.

During one visit to the Green City Market, I heard a shopper ask a grower if he was organic. "No," replied the farmer, "but we spray as little as possible, only when it's needed." (Meaning the produce might be fine but customers don't like mealy worms in their corn or caterpillars in their tomatoes.)

So, I started asking my favorite farmers the organic question. Most said no, quickly adding: "But we are 'sustainable,'" "We use integrated pest management" or "We're working toward organic certification." The independently run Green City Market in Lincoln Park has a mission to support local farmers, "those that abide by sustainable practices and ultimately preserve the land," said executive director Lyle Allen. It puts prospective vendors through an extensive application process, and admission is juried. It also requires that all farmers be third-party certified (as organic, sustainable or a higher standard) by 2012.

Currently, about one-third of the market's 61 farms, ranches, orchards and creameries are certified organic, and another one-third have applied for, and expect to get, third-party certification by 2010 or 2011, according to Allen. In addition, 24 percent follow organic guidelines and use sustainable farming practices. About 12 percent are certified by non-organic organizations such as Food Alliance, which offers "sustainable" certification.

Fresh, local and sustainably grown also are at the heart of the Geneva Green Market, which opened in 2007, according to Karen Stark, co-founder with Connie Weaver. Farmers must come from within 200 miles and fill out a "sustainability" statement with their application.

Raised on a Minnesota dairy farm, Stark is passionate about the market and extended it indoors last winter. "Even though we do a kids corner and chefs' demos, this is teaching people about the food. It's not about entertainment value," she said. "It's about sustaining your lifestyle with the most nutrition value in your food you can possibly buy locally."

Organic certification is not required – but Stark advises new farmers, "Don't be surprised if people turn around and walk away because they are expecting you to use best practices or be certified organic."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture requires farmers to be certified by a third party to use the term organic. Non-organic farmers use a variety of terms to show their practices: "sustainable," "chemical free" and "naturally grown." Or "healthy farming practices used," "no spray," free-ranged," "pastured," "grass fed" and "no antibiotics or hormones." In those cases, it is up to the consumer to decide what is acceptable.

The young Geneva Green Market now showcases 18 farmers, nearly double the number for 2008. Foot traffic jumped 35 percent last year, thanks to a state promotional grant.

Mick Klug Farms in St. Joseph, Mich., is one vendor working toward certification. The farm offers strawberries, asparagus, peaches and other fruit at Green City Market and the city-run market at Armitage Avenue and Halsted Street. Owner Mick Klug said the main challenges in going organic, though, are expense and the Midwest's humidity.

"The humidity causes rot, mildew and a lot of plant diseases, and the more humidity, the more insects," said

Klug, who uses organic materials to deter mildew and rot. But the extra amount of organic material needed compared with synthetics may make it unprofitable to go 100 percent organic.

In Urbana, Tiny Greens farm began life as an organic venture. Owner Bill Bagby now grows sprouts, shoots and microgreens indoors, while cultivating lettuce and peppers, baby greens, Swiss chard, beets and spinach outdoors on 2 of its 30 acres. Bagby studied music theory and composition in college, and worked in disaster relief and management, but he really wanted to be an organic farmer.

"I wanted to help do something that's going to help more than just a few people: to grow some good food, help the planet," he said.

Whether certified organic or simply fresh, local and sustainably grown, green fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy products are in demand around Chicago.

"Green City Market clocked 82,000 shoppers at the end of 2008, nearly double the previous few years," Allen said.

If you go:

– Green City Market

Location: Summer, 1750 N. Clark St. (south end of Lincoln Park)

Winter, 2430 N. Cannon Drive (Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum)

Days/hours: Summer, May 6-Oct. 31

Wednesdays and Saturdays, 7 a.m.-1 p.m.

chicagogreencitymarket.org

– Geneva Green Market

Location: Summer, 75 N. River Lane, Geneva

Winter, 11 N. 5th St., Geneva (Inglenook Pantry)

Days/hours: Summer, June 4-Oct. 29, Thursdays, 7 a.m.-1 p.m.

genevagreengreenmarket.org

What is organic or sustainable food?

For organic food, the USDA, which oversees the organic food designation, offers this explanation:

–"Organic food is produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations."

–"Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones."

–"Organic food is produced without using most conventional pesticides; fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; or ionizing radiation."

–"Before a product can be labeled 'organic,' a Government-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to make