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BUY ORGANIC ON A BUDGET

Five ways to eat organic and save money too.

By Maryann Hammers

If you could, you'd probably eat all organic all the time. You'd fill your cart with organic produce, pasta and pet foods and cram your cupboards with organic coffee and cookies. You know they're better for you, the environment and local farmers.

Problem is, all that tasty goodness comes at a price. Organic fare still costs more--sometimes a lot more--than the mainstream stuff. The good news is that with the growth of the organics industry, prices are becoming more competitive even as variety increases. In the meantime, here are some ideas for buying organic without breaking the budget.

Seek out a store's private label for significant savings. For example, Whole Foods has about 185 items in its "365 Organic Everyday Value" line, from hearty whole grain cereals to barbecue sauce. Also explore bulk bins for organic grains, cereals, flour, dried fruit, legumes, rice and granola.

Stick to foods in their natural form as much as possible. "Prepared and packaged food items have the greatest markup," says Luddene Perry, author of *A Field Guide to Buying Organic*.

Eat lower on the food chain. Organic beef is especially pricey, often costing several dollars more per pound than the conventional stuff. So make a little go a long way: Serve meat in soups and stews or as a side dish. "Think of meat as a condiment, taking up a quarter or less of your plate, and fill the rest with grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables," says Debra Boutin, MS, RD, clinic nutrition coordinator at the Bastyr Center for Natural Health in Seattle.

Prioritize your produce. In some cases, organic produce is definitely worth a higher price; at other times, it may be OK to save your money.

"Berries tend to be high in pesticide residue, so buying organic berries is a higher priority than buying organic bananas since you don't eat the peel," Boutin says. Check with the Environmental Working Group (foodnews.org/walletguide.php) for a guide to vegetables and fruits with the highest and lowest pesticide levels.

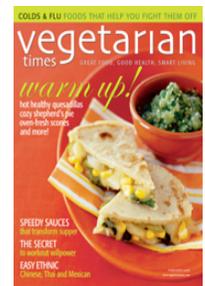
Try to buy straight from the source. "Trolling your local farmers' market 15-20 minutes before closing will net you considerable savings," Perry says. "No farmer wants to lug leftover produce back to the farm." Be aware, however, that not everything at a farmers' market is organic. To be sure, look for a sign identifying the farm as "certified organic." Some farms promote their fruits and vegetables as being "pesticide-free" or "naturally grown," which means they're following some organic growing principles but aren't certified.

For even better bargains, join a community supported agriculture (CSA) group. You buy a share (or a "subscription") in the costs of the farm's operation and get


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a portion of its bounty. "CSAs support local economies. Foods from these farms can be tastier since they are harvested at their peak," says Keecha Harris, DrPH, RD, spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association and adjunct professor of clinical nutrition at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. For a directory of local farmers' markets, organic growers and CSAs, visit localharvest.org.



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