

Going organic

Is it worth switching to organic food – and how much will it cost you to do it?

Organic food is now mainstream: almost nine out of ten people in our survey say they regularly or occasionally buy organic food, with fruit and veg the most popular items. Concerns about pesticides, chemicals and the environment, plus the fact that it's thought to be more natural and tastes better, are all reasons they gave for going for organics. However, the Food Standards

Agency (FSA) says that, as yet, the balance of scientific evidence doesn't prove that organic food is healthier or more nutritious than non-organic food.

Ninety-five per cent of those in our survey who buy organic food do so at a supermarket, and all the supermarkets we spoke to agreed that demand for organics is growing. According to Waitrose, which has sold organic food since 1983, it's now possible to do your whole weekly shop organically in its stores if you choose to. And Tesco (which didn't start selling organics until 1992) tells us that one in three of its customers now puts an organic item in their trolley.

This growth comes despite the fact that organic food usually costs more. We've

checked supermarket prices for a selection of organic, standard and economy items to see how much of a premium you'll have to pay to go green (see p20).

Last year, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose expanded their offerings even further by delivering boxes of organic fruit and vegetables directly to your door. Until now, box deliveries have been the preserve of smaller, local suppliers, but Tesco has declared that its box scheme 'is another way of taking affordable organics to the masses'.

We asked six couples to try out for a month the box schemes offered by these three supermarkets and three local schemes in the same areas. See below and overleaf for their accounts of how they fared.

Almost nine out of ten people in our survey buy organic food

OUR RESEARCH

In October 2006, 1,770 Which? online panel members completed a survey about organic food. Thanks to all who took part.

'I'M VERY IMPRESSED WITH RIVER NENE'

Lynda and Pete Crush 54, housewife, and 57, environmental health consultant

Lynda and Pete, from Essex, tried the medium-sized veg box (now £12) from River Nene – a collective of nine farms that delivers in the Midlands and eastern counties.

Lynda and Pete usually shop in Tesco, don't buy organic and hadn't been tempted by a box scheme before. Lynda says: 'I've always been wary of home deliveries, as I like to pick out fresh food items myself.'

But the Crushes are keen converts. Lynda enthused: 'The veg is consistently good quality, fresh and crisp, and the variety has definitely enriched our diet. Not choosing what goes into the box

turned out to be a big plus as it's been great to have different veg to try out. Sweet potato proved to be a hit with Pete, and fennel was a first – I can heartily recommend fennel, pea and mint soup!

'I did buy a couple of extra things from the supermarket each week, but when I compared the cost, I thought the box was cheaper. We've really embraced the idea of buying local produce and eating seasonally.

'I'm very impressed with River Nene – the way it carries the "green ethic" through every aspect of its business was a big factor in our decision to keep using the box service.'



'We thought organic veg tasted better and that it was good value'

Abel and Cole

BOX Small mixed organic box £10

DELIVERY London, parts of Home Counties, and towns in south and west England; can't choose time or day

CUSTOMER VERDICT Cancelled April Richardson and Ty Smith from Kent usually shop in Tesco, where they buy organic chicken, eggs and around half their fruit and veg. April told us: 'I prefer the flavour of organic fruit and veg, and I'm also worried about pesticides.'

April found ordering online easy, and liked the information on where the produce comes from (if it's imported it's never transported by air). She summed up: 'The box was always delivered when promised, and the variety was good. We got chard one week, which was new to me. I had to look up cooking instructions but I'd definitely buy it again. I thought that, considering the box is delivered, it's good value – but having said that, I won't continue with it.'

'I like to pick out my own fruit and veg. I also thought quality varied. It was mostly in good condition, but one week a couple of the beetroot had white mould, and another week the pears deteriorated quickly.'

Ocado (Waitrose)

BOX Medium organic veg box £14.90 for ten items (minimum order £40)

DELIVERY Around half of England (south east, Midlands, south coast and north west – check your postcode online); can choose day and time of delivery within one-hour time slot (£5 charge for orders less than £75)

CUSTOMER VERDICT Continuing



Ty Smith and April Richardson (left) and Nicola Cobley and Jason Marriott (right) had differing views

Jason Marriott and Nicola Cobley from Nottingham normally shop in Asda, and the only organic food they buy is milk. Jason was surprised by how clean and fresh the veg looked. He added: 'We had butternut squash and pumpkin, neither of which we'd cooked before but both really liked. There was a leaflet in the box telling us how to store the veg and giving recipe tips.'

'Most was from the UK, but we had green beans from Egypt and squash and garlic from Spain, too. We definitely ended up eating more veg than we normally would in a week to make sure we didn't waste any – and we made a lot of soup to freeze!'

'We'll stick with the box. In fact, we're going to go for a bigger one with fruit in, too. We were impressed by the standard and variety and the convenience of a home delivery. We also thought organic veg tasted better and that it was good value. We'll be buying more organic food from now on.'



'We definitely ended up eating more veg than we normally would in a week'

Sainsbury's

BOX Organic seasonal selection box £10.99 (minimum order £25)

DELIVERY East Midlands and East Anglia at present; can choose day and time of delivery but charge of up to £5 on some days/time slots

CUSTOMER VERDICT Cancelled Chris and Jane Gore don't usually buy organic food. They shop in Tesco, Somerfield and their local market. Chris told us: 'There was a lot of information with the box, including where in the UK the produce is grown and cooking tips. There was also a note saying the produce has a shorter shelf life, although we found it lasted just as long.'

'But although the quality of the produce was good, we found the box too repetitious and there wasn't anything unusual. We got a bit sick of celery! We also suspected we could buy these items separately for less and have more variety. We won't continue.'

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBIN BECKHAM, PAGE ONE PHOTOGRAPHY, PHILIP REESON

WHAT'S IN SEASON: FROM SALAD AND STRAWBERRIES TO SWEDE AND SQUASH

Rob Haward of River Nene tells us how the contents of its organic boxes vary throughout the growing year

MAY AND JUNE

The first salad leaves like rocket are ready in early May, followed by spinach and cabbage. We need to import some things, such as carrots from Spain, but people get excited when the first local broad beans or wet garlic appear in the box by the end of June.



JULY AND AUGUST

By July we're back to using almost entirely our own veg – beans, courgettes, broccoli, new potatoes, celery and various lettuce. There are also cherry tomatoes, cucumbers and basil from our greenhouses. Strawberries are followed by tayberries, raspberries and currants.



SEPTEMBER TO NOVEMBER

The English growing season hits its peak around September, with sweet corn, winter squash, leeks, romanesco broccoli and cauliflower. The autumn salad leaves like radicchio, escarole, endive and the last rocket and lettuce also feature.



DECEMBER TO MARCH



Parsnips, onions, leeks, carrots, potatoes and swede – all the Christmas veg! There are sprouts in December and January, and cabbage and cauliflower. We often have purple-sprouting broccoli by the end of March, plus Jerusalem artichokes and celeriac, too.

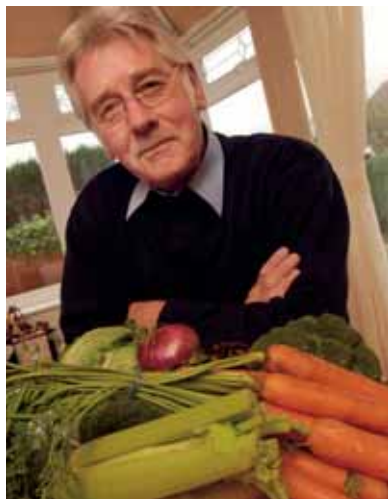
Tesco

BOX Small mixed organic box £9.98

DELIVERY South London at present; can choose day and time of delivery (two-hour slots) – costs £3.99-£5.99

CUSTOMER VERDICT Cancelled Emily and Paul Landsborough from London usually buy organic meat and eggs but not fruit or veg, and shop in Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury's and local shops.

Emily said: 'I was pleasantly surprised the first week – it was easy to place the order, delivery was good (though it was expensive at the weekend) and there was a good range of produce. We weren't sure what to do with the beetroot, but we made soup and roasted some and loved it! We had leeks left over at the end of the week, but we used everything else – although we had to try quite hard to do so.'



Chris Gore: 'Sick of celery'

APRIL AND MAY

This is the 'hungry gap' – rhubarb and spring greens are plentiful, but our leeks, potatoes and cauliflowers have all run out so we have to turn to southern Europe. Fruit and veg grows here in a window of time dictated by nature – and May/June sees the beginning of that window again.



Paul Landsborough found a weekly delivery too much

'It got harder, though, as the trial went on. A weekly delivery was too much for us, especially as the contents were very similar. It's fun to get the box and see what's included, but we still ended up buying things we normally do, like peppers. So it didn't replace our regular shopping – just added to it. We thought the food we wasted meant it wasn't good value, and if we want the box to work for us, we'd need to change our eating habits.'

Trinity Farm

BOX Premium mixed box with veg, salad and fruit £12.50 + £1 delivery

DELIVERY Nottingham, Derby, Belper, Duffield, Heanor, Ilkeston and Ripley; can't choose time or day of delivery

CUSTOMER VERDICT Cancelled Liam Dixon and Julia Day from Nottingham usually shop in Tesco and never buy organic food. They found ordering straightforward. Liam explains: 'We were told roughly what kind of seasonal veg and salad to expect, and also that if there was anything we didn't like, it could be substituted with an alternative.'

'The veg wasn't always as perfect looking as supermarket veg but it was perfectly edible. There was a good mix, and we had some unusual items – like purple carrots! But there were some things that we didn't recognise or



Liam Dixon and Julia Day had some unusual purple carrots

know what to do with, and no extra information was provided. After looking it up we found we'd had kohlrabi one week.

'We still bought unseasonal veg from the supermarket – like baby sweet corn, mange tout and bean sprouts. At the end of the day, the items were often things we wouldn't usually choose, and we didn't think the veg always lasted as long. We did continue for a couple of weeks after the trial finished, but we couldn't eat it all before it was past its best – so we'll be going back to the supermarket.'

Boxing advice

Here's some advice if you want to join a box scheme

■ Many schemes let you choose the box size, but few allow you to pick what goes in it (though some let you specify items you don't like). According to the Soil Association, you'll usually get potatoes, carrots and onions, plus whatever else is available. In early spring especially, you may find the box a bit repetitive (see 'What's in season', left).

■ Food is less likely to be over-wrapped or packaged. All our triallists found that the carrots and potatoes came with mud on, but the rest of the produce was pretty clean and presentable. Although the produce wasn't always cosmetically perfect, all of our testers thought the fruit and veg they received was tasty.

■ Both couples who continued with the box schemes loved the idea of eating seasonally and the challenge of adapting their meals around the contents. They felt they ate more healthily than usual. River Nene was particularly good at providing recipes and information on how the produce had been grown.

■ Supermarkets allowed our triallists to choose a delivery date and time; local suppliers delivered on a set day. However, all our testers were happy with the arrangements.

■ Produce is not necessarily local – during the trial the Ocado box had veg from Egypt and Spain. Ask potential suppliers about their policy on this – for example, Abel and Cole imports food by sea, not air.

Costing the earth?

Farming organically costs more, as animals are usually raised to higher welfare standards (more space to roam or the chance to feed outdoors in a more natural way) and crops have lower yields without pesticides to keep bugs at bay. Organic farming can also be kinder to the environment. For example, pesticides can have a big environmental impact – water companies spend more than £120 million a year monitoring and removing pesticides from supplies of drinking water.

If organic and conventional products were the same price, 84 per cent of those in our survey said they'd choose the organic version. The reality, though, is that a totally organic trolley can be expensive.

We bought a basket of 11 own-brand

or nearest equivalent items of food (organic, standard and economy ranges) in Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose on the same day in November last year. Where pack sizes varied, we worked out the cost per 100g or per litre, and calculated a standardised pack size so we could compare prices fairly. We then calculated the average price, which is shown below.

Our organic shopping basket cost on average £22.54 and our standard basket cost £17.46, so switching from standard goods to organic cost around £5 in each of our stores. But substituting the economy versions of some products in the basket reduced the cost to £12.69, so if you buy a lot of economy products, a switch to organic will hurt your pocket a lot more.

Apples

Average cost for a pack of four
Organic £1.93, standard £1.58

In regular tests carried out by the Pesticide Residues Committee (PRC), an independent advisory group set up by the government, apples consistently show high levels of pesticide residues. In 2005, 79 per cent of all apples tested had residues up to the maximum permitted level (although none exceeded it), and 55 per cent of apples contained more than one type of residue.

But there can be an environmental trade-off in terms of food miles (the distance food travels from farm to plate), even when buying organic. Of all the organic pre-packed apples we bought, none was grown in the UK. Most came from Italy, but some were from the US and Australia.



Eggs

Average cost for six medium eggs
Organic free range £1.44, standard free range 95p, economy 65p



Battery hens are kept in individual small cages in large sheds with no access to the outside.

Free-range hens can be kept in flocks of up to 2,500 a hectare (although Lion Mark, Soil Association and Freedom Food free-range eggs must come from flocks of no more than 1,000 a hectare) and have continuous daytime access to runs.

Hens producing organic eggs will be allowed to roam free for at least a third of their lives (hens certified by the Soil Association have access to the outdoors for the whole of their laying lives), and must be fed mostly organic food.

The only supermarket to sell eggs certified by the Soil Association is Waitrose.

Butter

Average for a 250g pack of salted English butter
Organic 95p, standard 69p, economy 57p

Salt levels in butter varied, but none was above 2 per cent. The butter with the lowest salt level overall (at 1 per cent) was Sainsbury's organic butter.

But in Tesco, the butter with the least amount of salt added was the value butter, with 1.8 per cent.



Carrots

Average cost for 500g pack
Organic 54p, standard 36p

Tests by the PRC show that carrots have consistently low pesticide residues. In 2005, only 3 per cent of samples tested contained any residues and none showed traces of more than one kind. This suggests that going for organic carrots is not going to help you avoid that many more pesticides.

On the other hand, the cost involved wasn't so great – 500g of organic carrots cost on average only 20p more than their standard equivalents. But you should still keep an eye on price labels.

We found a 750g bag of organic carrots in Tesco priced at the equivalent of 90.9p a kg, while a 400g bunch of organic carrots with the green stalks still attached worked out at an eye-watering £3.73 a kg.



Switching our standard basket of goods to organic cost around £5

Cherry tomatoes

Average cost for 250g
Organic £1.08, standard £1.09



Don't assume that organic is always going to be pricier – we found that organic cherry tomatoes in Waitrose and Sainsbury's were cheaper than the standard equivalent. Otherwise, organic ones cost between 19p and 38p more for a 250g pack.

Milk

Average cost for two pints of semi-skimmed milk
Organic 82p, standard 64p



Organic full-fat milk contains higher levels of omega-3, beta-carotene and vitamin E than conventionally produced milk. However, the FSA says that the omega-3 in organic milk is not as beneficial as that in oily fish. It concluded that the omega-3 in organic milk would not provide significantly greater benefits than conventional milk as part of a healthy diet.



Chocolate

Average cost of 100g bar of dark chocolate containing at least 70 per cent cocoa solids
Organic branded £1.49, own brand 99p
Standard branded £1.36, own brand 83p

The number of additives that can be used in organic food is limited. Hydrogenated fat (which can contain artery-clogging trans fat) is not permitted in organic food, but can be found in non-organic food, including some chocolate.



Organic growers can use only a very limited number of pesticides

New potatoes

Average cost for 1kg of new potatoes
Organic £1.55, standard £1.13

PRC figures show that between 2001 and 2005, around a third of potatoes tested contained pesticide residues, with 7 to 13 per cent containing more than one kind. Residues are not found as frequently in potatoes as in apples or grapes, but you may want to stick to organic spuds if pesticides are a concern, as organic growers can use only a very limited number of pesticides.

Tea bags

For 80 everyday teabags
Organic £1.66, standard £1.19, economy 34p

Our Australian counterparts, Choice, found pesticide traces in nearly 40 per cent of the brands of tea tested. The levels and numbers of residues in black tea were lower than in green tea or herbal infusions. No residues were detected in the organic teas tested.

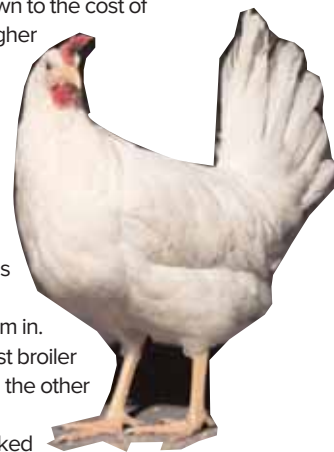


Chicken

Average cost for 1.5kg whole raw chicken
Organic free range £6.87, standard free range £5.51, economy £2.75

Average cost for a 275g pack of skinless chicken breasts
Organic free range £4.21, standard free range £2.96, economy £2.22

The price difference between economy and organic chicken was huge (often more than double the price per kg), and it's partly down to the cost of providing higher welfare standards. Organic and free-range chickens must have access to outside areas and more space to roam in. The cheapest broiler chickens, on the other hand, are densely packed in huge sheds, often with less space than battery hens. Going free range or organic are both better options if you're concerned about animal welfare.



Checklist

Advice on buying organic

- All organic food sold in the UK must display a certification number, which guarantees that it meets minimum government standards. The Soil Association (www.soilassociation.org) certifies 70 per cent of organic produce here and its number is UK5.
- For box schemes in your area, see www.whyorganic.org
- Worried about food miles? Check where suppliers source their food from.
- If you're trying to limit your intake of pesticides, organics are a good option, especially with some fruit and veg like apples and grapes, which consistently show higher levels of pesticide residues.

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