

Question time

SEPTEMBER 2007

Q What is the Soil Association and what does it do?

A It's a charity, established in 1946, to promote the connection between the health of soil, plants, animals and

people. Arguably, it was one of the world's first environmental charities and it's now become much better known for the promotion of organic food and farming and the certification of organic food.

Natural selection

Patrick Holden, Director of the Soil Association, explains why it's vital for us to eat more organic and locally produced food



Patrick Holden: 'We've got big issues – food security is a real concern'

Q How can consumers know that food labelled as organic really is organic?

A It's now law that food that is described as organic must conform to EU standards. All organic-certified operations must be inspected at least once a year. In addition to that, we carry out spot checks, either on a random basis or if we have reason to believe there may be an issue. We come down in a rigorous way where we find that the standards aren't in order.

Q Why does organic food cost more?

A Organic farmers have to conform with organic standards, which means they avoid the use of nitrogen fertiliser, which artificially stimulates growth and can produce a rapid yield increase. We have some higher costs – particularly labour – and the result of that is that those costs are passed on. The big issue for all of us is whether we are prepared to pay more for ecological sustainability.

Q Why are you considering stopping air-freighted food being labelled organic?

A There was a feeling that we were part of the problem by allowing air freight. We need to take action on that. I think that even air travel will become an occasional luxury within our lifetime, so I can't really see a future for the air freighting of organic food. But that is my opinion. We are currently in a public consultation looking at a range of options.

Q Are the big supermarkets investing enough in organic produce?

A The supermarkets' core business is to give the public what they want, which has been, and still is to a degree, cheap, anonymous food. We want the

public to shift from wanting this to wanting local, sustainably produced food. Have supermarkets gone far enough? I think they've gone as far as the public. If the public change, they will change because they will go out of business if they don't.

Q Is organic food growing in popularity in all sectors of society?

A The profile of people who are buying organic is changing. People are buying more organic food more often and there's also a shift towards lower income groups. People on relatively low incomes are spending more on organic food because they think it's better for their children and the environment.

Q If you were on a tight budget and could choose only one type of organic food to buy, what would it be?

A I think I'd start with fresh food such as fruit and vegetables. That will tell you more because your palate can tell you quite a lot about the quality of food. Try buying one or two products and buy direct. You'll find if you get on to an organic box scheme or buy from a farmers' market or a farm shop, often the price is lower because you cut out a link in the chain.

Q What about the issue of locally produced food?

A Over the next 20 years, we must relocate. It's one of the great challenges of our time. What we've got at the moment is a distribution system that is incredibly vulnerable. During the lorry drivers' strike a few years ago, I was told that London was within days of the supermarket shelves being empty. Twenty million people living in Greater London, no food. I don't want to worry people but I think we've got a lot of big issues and food security is a real concern.