

BEYOND ORGANIC By Eliot Coleman, printed in Mother Earth News

New ideas, especially those that directly challenge an established orthodoxy, follow a familiar path. First, the orthodoxy says the new idea is rubbish. Then the orthodoxy attempts to minimize the new idea's growing appeal. Finally, when the new idea proves unstoppable, the orthodoxy tries to claim the idea as its own. This is precisely the path organic food production has followed.

First, organic pioneers were ridiculed. Then, as evidence of the benefits of organic farming became more obvious to more people, mainstream chemical agriculture actively condemned organic ideas as unfeasible. Now that the food-buying public has become enthusiastic about organically grown foods, the food industry wants to take over. Toward that end the USDA-controlled national definition of "organic" is tailored to meet the marketing needs of organizations that have no connection to the agricultural integrity "organic" once represented. We now need to ask whether we want to be content with an "organic" food option that places the marketing concerns of corporate America ahead of nutrition, flavor and social benefits to consumers.

When I stated as an organic grower 35 years ago, it was a simpler world. Organic was a way of thinking rather than a "profit center." The decision to farm organically was a statement of faith in the wisdom of the natural world, to the quality of the crops and livestock, and to the nutritional benefits of properly cultivated food. It was obvious that good farming and exceptional food only resulted from the care and nurturing practiced by the good farmer.

The initial development of organic farming during the first half of the 20th century arose from the gut feelings of farmers who were trying to reconcile the biological truths they saw in their own fields with the chemical dogma the agricultural science-of-the-moment was teaching. The farmers came to very different conclusions from those of the academic agronomists. The farmers worked on developing agricultural practices that harmonized with the direction in which their "unscientific" conclusions were leading them. Their goals were to grow the most nutritious food possible, while protecting the soil for future generations.

The development and refinement of those biologically-based agricultural practices continues today. It's what makes this farming adventure so compelling. Each year I hope to do things better than I did last year because I will know Nature's systems better. But my delight in the intricacies of the natural world -- my adventure into an ever deeper appreciation of the soil-plant-animal nutrition cycle and how to optimize it -- is not acceptable to the homogenized mentality of mass marketing. The food giants that are taking over "organic" want a simplistic list of ingredients so they can do organic-by-the-numbers. They are derisive about what they label "belief systems" and they are loath to acknowledge that more farmer commitment is involved in producing real food than any number of approved inputs can encompass.

The transition of "organic" from small farm to big time is now upon us. Although getting toxic chemicals out of agriculture is an improvement we can all applaud, it only removes the negatives. The positive focus, enhancing the biological quality of the food produced, is nowhere to be seen. The new standards are based on what not to do rather than what to do. They will be administered through the USDA, whose director said recently, "Organic food does not mean it is superior, safer, or more healthy than

conventional food." Well, I still agree with the old time organic pioneers. I believe that properly grown food is superior, safer and healthier. I also believe national certification bureaucracies are only necessary when food is grown by strangers in far away places rather than by neighbors whom you know. I further believe good, fresh food, grown locally by committed growers is the very best to be found.

<http://www.fourseasonfarm.com/main/authentic/beyond.html>