

Organic Food

When it comes to a hand-labeled produce sign that says “organic,” it’s buyer beware. Federal regulations are comprehensive, stating that for USDA certification, a grower must do such things as use organic seed, plant on land that has been pesticide-free for three years, and follow specified weed control practices. Organic meat and poultry must comply with similar regulations.

“There is no method for educating people [who do not become certified] about regulations,” according to Doug Crabtree, manager of Montana’s organic certification program. He said the certification process is comprehensive but expensive because of the cost of working with a grower and ongoing inspections.

Organic growers who make less than \$5,000 a year are not required to be certified but are on their own to wade through complex federal regulations to make sure they are following official guidelines. Because usage of the term “organic” (as opposed to “USDA organic”) by noncertified growers is not checked, a grower might use it informally, without regard to federal regulations.

A nonprofit group provides a Certified Naturally Grown designation as an inexpensive alternative to the USDA program. But many vendors at farmers markets sell what they call “naturally grown” produce, a term that implies no pesticides are used. You have to ask the vendor for details to determine what exactly he or she means by whatever term they use.

Be particularly cautious when “natural” and “organic” are applied to meat, poultry, and eggs. These terms do not guarantee the animals are raised humanely.

There are many nuances to interpreting “organic” and “natural.” Consumers need to be aware of the source of what they are buying and ask questions. This is possible at farmers markets, where you come face-to-face with the growers and ranchers.