

Activity: Market Super Sleuths

Students take a trip to a local supermarket or grocery store and use their research skills to gather information about organic products that are available in their local area.

Background:

We are all consumers, and as consumers we can wield a great deal of power. We choose what we want to consume—it may be a pair of running shoes, a pair of jeans, or a sound system, or the food we eat. What influences our decisions? Advertising, availability, our family or friends, the packaging, concern for the environment, or possibly our health. The more we know about what we are going to buy, the more educated a decision we can make.

If you have not already done so, you may wish to take a quick survey of your class to find out what they think organic food is. If they are like most people, they probably think organic means a fruit or vegetable fresh from a garden or farm. They may not realize that organic products also come in packages, cans, frozen, and in bulk. And, they may not realize that every step of organic food production is evaluated and inspected by an independent organic certifier. Every certified organic product has an audit trail that begins at the farm and follows the product to the market.

More specifically, when a grower or processor is certified organic it means that a public or private organization has verified that the grower or processor meets or exceeds specific standards. These standards include:

- The land on which food or fiber is grown must be free of prohibited substances for three years prior to certification.
- The farmer and processor must keep detailed records of the methods and materials they used in growing or producing organic products.
- A third-party certifier inspects all methods and materials annually.
- All farmers and handlers must keep written Organic Plans that describe in detail their management practices.

In this activity students will head to the market to investigate the availability of organic products in their area, how they are packaged, and how they are promoted and displayed within the store.

What You Need:

For each student:

- journal or notebook
- pen or pencil

Before You Begin:

If you take your class to the supermarket for a field trip, be sure to make arrangements with the manager before you go. Try to arrange some time for students to interview the manager about the organic products he or she buys for the store.

What To Do:

1. Brainstorm with students a list of products that they have recently purchased. Ask them to list what they bought and what influenced their decision to buy that item. If necessary, stimulate the discussion with questions such as:

- Have any of you purchased new running shoes recently? Did you buy a particular brand? What influenced you to buy that brand?
- Do any of you have a favorite ice cream that you buy? What influenced you to buy that brand?
- Did you think about the environment and whether or not the product you bought has had any impact on the environment? Was any food or fiber part of the product you bought? How was it grown and processed?

2. Have students work in small groups. Ask them to make a group list of what they want to find out in the store. Remind students that they are investigating organic products. Some investigations they might want to consider are:

- How many different kinds of organic products are sold at the store?
- How many of the organic products are packaged? How many are fresh?

How can you tell the packaged organic products are "organic?"

- How does the price of organic products compare to the price of non-organic products? Be sure to compare products that are of equal size (for example, a 28-ounce can of organic tomatoes and a 28-ounce can of non-organic tomatoes). Compare the ingredients on the label of the two products. Are all of the ingredients the same?

- Compare the packaging of the organic products and the non-organic products? Do you notice any differences? With organic products, the aim of packaging is to use as much as necessary, but as little as possible.

- Does the store try to draw your attention to the organic products?
- Does the store try to draw your attention to certain kinds of products?

What kinds?

- What products are sold at your eye level?

3. After students have returned to the classroom, invite them to share their information. If students went to different stores, compare the results from store to store.

Observations:

- Were you surprised at the number of organic products that were available at the store? Explain.
- Were there more fresh organic products or packaged organic products?
- Did the store promote the organic products as much as the other products?
- Were there any differences between the packaging used for organic products and the packaging used for non-organic products?

Conclusion:

- Based on your observations, do you think that many people buy organic products in your region? Explain your answer.

Extension:

- Design an advertising campaign to use in a store to promote organic products. What information would you want to include in your ad?