

UNIVERSITY

Organic food gets mixed response Consumers shy away from higher prices

By April Brinkman
Emerald Contributor

Are shoppers willing to buy imperfect-looking fruits and vegetables grown without pesticides?

According to a recent OSPIRG survey, the answer would appear to be yes, but a better question might be, are they willing to pay more for them?

An October report by the Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group claims consumers prefer cosmetically scarred, organically grown produce to fruits and vegetables that are unblemished but chemically treated.

originally shunned scarred or slightly damaged oranges showed more willingness to buy imperfect fruit after they were told it was grown with fewer pesticides.

However, many local food retailers say they have found organically grown unprofitable.

"People appear to talk and request organics more than is translated into their buying habits," said Bridget Flanagan, Safeway's public affairs manager for Oregon and southwest Washington.

Both Safeway and Albertsons stores have experimented with organically grown produce but have received only nominal interest from customers.

"We tested selling organically grown produce in Southern California and Florida and were not able to sell enough so that it would even be worth the shelf space," said Steve Hilton, Albertsons national director of product quality and environmental programs.

Safeway sells organically grown fruit in 14 of its 102 stores in the region, Flanagan said. "Sales are OK, but people have not taken as great an interest as we thought they would," she said.

Some food wholesalers found interest in organically grown foods to be a short-lived trend.

"A year ago there was a lot of talk against pesticides; the resistance doesn't seem to be there anymore," said Pat Baccellieri, an owner of Pioneer Foods, one of the suppliers for the University housing department.

"People are starting to consider the use of pesticides as a healthy way to grow produce."

Jody Watts, housing department purchasing agent, said she was not aware that the de-

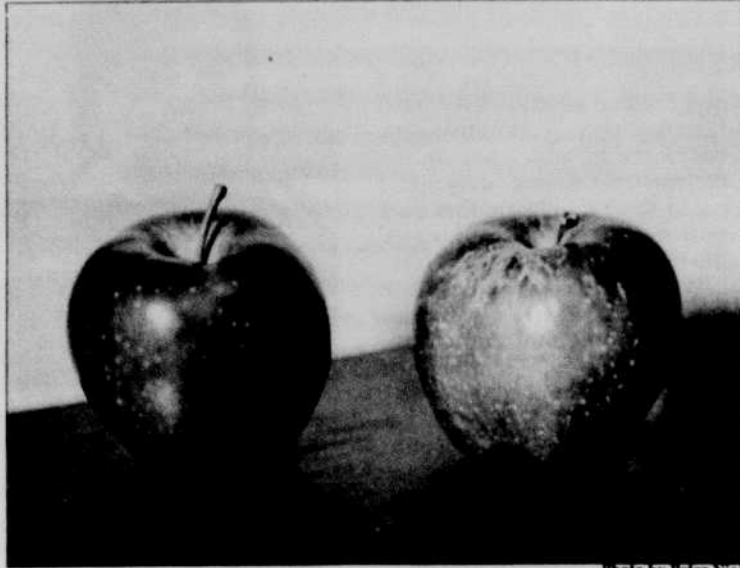


Photo by Peter Nisi

High prices have caused some shoppers to stay away from organically grown produce, such as the apple on the right.

partment's suppliers even offered organically grown produce.

"We'd be willing to try it," she said. "We look at both quality and price."

According to the OSPIRG report, the amount of agricultural chemicals used on the nation's food supply has increased nine times in the last 40 years.

Ron Willoughby, an owner of All-Fresh Produce, another food supplier for University Housing, doesn't see the increase as necessarily a bad thing. He said produce quality is 10 times better today than in the past because of pesticides.

However, others disagree. OSPIRG consumer advocate John Stubenvoll said the claim that pesticides create better produce "goes by the assumption that eating a small amount of a probable human carcinogen is safe."

A report released in September by OSPIRG's national office found that 69 pesticides linked to cancer are legally allowed on food by the federal government.

Willoughby said truly organically grown produce accounts for only about 2 percent of agricultural production. In the marketplace, a small supply means consumers often pay higher prices for naturally grown foods.

Students and other consumers may find themselves caught between their desire to buy pesticide-free produce and their desire to stretch their food budgets as far as possible.

University sophomore Natanya Myers said she tries to buy organic fruits and vegetables when they are available and when it is convenient.

"There shouldn't have to be an extra expense for organically grown fruit," she said. "It should be the norm."

In the OSPIRG study, 241 people were shown a cosmetically perfect orange grown with pesticides, and then shown two other oranges with two different levels of damage.

When first asked, 66 percent of those surveyed said they were not likely to buy the slightly damaged orange, and 74 percent said they would stay away from the more severely scarred orange.

However, after hearing an explanation of reduced pesticide use, consumers in the survey substantially increased their support for the imperfect oranges.

Seventy-eight percent said they were more willing to purchase the slightly damaged orange, and 71 percent said they were willing to buy the severely scarred orange.

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