

Organic seeds do not necessarily produce better plants, but their production may be better for the land on which they are grown.



Organic vs. Conventional

Are we thinking about seeds all wrong? **By Jeanne Grunert**

Seeds. Those tiny capsules of genetic wonder, containing all that will become a juicy tomato, a magnificent oak, a beautiful rose, or a mischievous morning glory.

Go into any garden center on a spring day and you'll see racks upon racks of seeds. Frugal gardeners may stop by the farm store for a plain sack of beans they hope grows into something magical. Others succumb to the lure of glossy color photos promising garden delights to come.

Tucked among these packages is a category gaining popularity: organic garden seeds. Since 2011, there has been a 70 percent increase in the investment in organic plant breeding and trained organic seed professionals according to

a press release from the Organic Seed Alliance. Although organic seeds cost more to produce, the demand is there, given that Americans spend over \$50 billion annually on organic products, including produce and yes, organic garden seeds.

But what is an organic seed? What makes seeds organic and others conventional? Does buying organic seed produce better plants – or a better garden?

WHAT MAKES SEEDS ORGANIC?

According to the Cooperative Extension Organic Seed Resources Guide, "Organically produced seed is seed grown and certified according to the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) guidelines." Therefore, any seeds marked

with "Certified Organic" are typically produced on a farm listed as USDA certified.

Such farms must follow procedures and guidelines outlined by the USDA NOP and renew their application to be a certified organic farm. Typical organic practices eschew the use of certain pesticides or herbicides, ensure soil health and fertility through crop rotation and the use of cover crops, manures, and other techniques, and more.

A farmer or seed grower may utilize organic growing and management practices on his farm and still not obtain USDA organic certification. The laborious, time- and money-intensive process is not right for everyone and many find themselves unable to meet

every checkbox on the organization's list. This does not take away from the care give or the work do for the land, animals, and plants they manage; it does mean, however, that they cannot use a label that consumers recognize (and are willing to pay more for when they see it).

Adding to the confusion is that the definition of organic, while it implies a level of purity or quality, it may not be better or different when it comes to the actual seeds themselves or the resulting plants. Certified organic farms are not required to use organic seeds to grow their produce if they can demonstrate that the seeds they need are not available as organic seeds. And packages not marked organic may contain open-pollinated or heirloom seeds, which may have limited or light impact on the environment in which they were grown, making them a good choice for gardeners concerned with this aspect of seed production.

In short: There's no right or wrong answer to the organic versus conventional seed debate. Commercial seed production is a complex endeavor that includes growers, producers, packagers, farmers, collectors, preservation groups, home gardeners, and more.

BUYING SEEDS: YOUR CHOICE

"The benefits of buying organic seed is that you are supporting the good stewardship of the land that went into producing the seeds," said Lee Buttala, executive director of Seed Savers Exchange. The Seed Savers Exchange preserves a collection of 25,000 rare and heirloom seeds at its seed bank in Iowa. It makes many of these available to the public, who may, in turn, collect the seeds from their own garden, and share, save or continue to use them in their own gardens.

Because the certified organic seal indicates the farm where the seed has been grown has met the USDA NOP criteria, the public may be assured of consistency in the organic farming practices used to produce the seeds.

But as for organic seeds producing better tomatoes, cucumbers or petunias, the answer is, alas, no. There is no evidence that organic seeds produce better, healthier, or more fruitful plants than other seed production methods. Many factors other than seeds themselves influence the quality of the flowers, fruits or mature plants.



↑ Organic and conventional seeds can both produce healthy, delicious vegetables.

← Gardeners must make informed choices about the products and seeds they use and understand the impact such choices have on their gardens and the environment.

When researching this topic and speaking with experts, it soon became apparent that the answer to "organic versus conventional" seeds has no clear-cut, one-size fits all answer. Like many gardening concepts, organic seeds are good in some respects but may not be the answer for everyone.

The beauty of gardening is that while gardeners can influence and guide their gardens, in the end, it is nature that determines which will thrive and produce an abundant harvest and which won't. Our job as gardeners is to provide an environment conducive to the plant's productivity; beyond that, it's out of our control. ♡

Jeanne Grunert is a writer and amateur gardener who never met a plant (or a cat) she didn't like.

SOURCES

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