

## **COOKING GREEN**

# **Organic Plant-Based Food**

by **Kay Bushnell**

Choosing a diet of plant foods—grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and nuts—is the single most important dietary step one can take to benefit the natural environment. The next most significant dietary step is choosing organically grown plant foods. Organic foods are grown using sustainable agricultural practices such as composting and use of beneficial insects and without toxic pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers. Organic principles also include biodiversity of crops and a safe environment for farm workers. Organic growing methods can significantly reduce the amount of toxic residues in our foods, soil, and ground water.

In the last several decades consumer interest in organically produced food has grown steadily. As a result, many mainstream markets as well as “natural food” markets are offering a wide selection of organic grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and nuts as well as organic convenience foods. It is even becoming easier to find restaurants that serve organically produced food. Enthusiasm for organic ingredients is growing among gourmet chefs throughout the country.

Some organic farms undergo the scrutiny of an accrediting organization such as the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). Many shoppers will only buy produce that is grown on a CCOF-accredited farm. Beginning in April 2002 all farmers growing organic food must comply with organic standards set by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Sometimes the price of organically grown food can deter those who would like to purchase it. Eating seasonally is one way to keep the cost down.

Produce that is in season and in greatest supply tends to be more reasonably priced. Watch for specials on seasonal organic produce; build menus around seasonal organic foods; shop for seasonal organic produce at farmers’ markets; and consider growing your own organic vegetables and fruits. You will taste the flavorful difference in food that is freshly harvested from both farmers’ markets or your own backyard as opposed to food that has been transported long distances or stored for days before being offered for sale. Freshly picked ripe produce is also more nutrient-rich than food that has been on the road or in storage.

Budget-minded consumers can also look for “transitional” produce, which is usually priced lower than organic produce. The “transitional” label means that the field in which the food was grown is becoming organic, a process that takes three years. Transitional crops have been grown under the same high standards as certified organic produce for at least one year.

Why not prepare an all-organic supper by combining summer's bounty of fresh organic tomatoes, olives, herbs, nuts, and pasta? The chopped walnuts are a nutritious component of this rich tasting, easy dish.