

# REAPING THE BENEFITS OF ORGANIC FARMING

New practices bring added value to producers and consumers



There is increasing awareness of the health benefits of organic food – and its profitability. Organic agriculture brings added value to producers, retailers and consumers. It guarantees sustainable farming and better soil quality with tastier and healthier products. Investing in organic agriculture gives producers a competitive edge within an expanding sector both locally and abroad. Evolving foreign demand and regulations on agricultural exports are making organic agriculture an attractive prospect. Over 300 certified local organic producers now exist and a new law is being debated to regulate this emerging sector.



### RISING 'GREEN' DEMAND

Local organic products are on average 25 percent more expensive, but "demand for certified agricultural products increased to the extent that it exceeded supply locally," said Charbel Salameh, Member of the National Committee for Organic Farming. The younger target market is more aware of the benefits of such products. "Youngsters and young parents particularly are big clients of organic food," said Zeina Baaklini, owner and General Manager of Live Organic, an organic products shop. Demand is reflected in the number of experts in the field. The Swiss Research Institute for Organic Agriculture reported more than 300 certified producers, processors, and distributors in the local organic food industry. LibanCert, the first local organic inspection and certification body, had more than 30 new applicants for organic certification last year. The local offices of the Mediterranean Institute for Certification (IMC) also grant green certificates. Producers also work closely with the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health, the Industrial Research Institute, the standardization body (Libnor) and foreign institutions to make sure their products conform to standards and regulations. Lab tests by quality inspection teams are also conducted on a regular basis throughout the production process. The resulting improvement in the quality of agriculture products has impacted the export market.

### VEGETABLES TO DETERGENT

The range of green products has expanded to include not only vegetables and fruits, but also beauty products, grains and pulses, candy and snacks, spirits, and even household items such as tableware, detergents, and trash bags. Biomass is a local supplier of organic products that started out in 2008 with a farm in Batroun. The company sells certified fresh produce and



processed foods from 40 producers around the country, including fruits, vegetables, eggs, herbs, and juices. All products follow European organic farming regulations. In 2011, Biomass established the country's first organic dairy production facility in Qab Elias where it processes fresh milk, obtained only from organic-certified farms, and free from antibiotics and chemical residues. The purity of the water used in the production is ensured through regular treatment and on-site testing. Other suppliers have chosen to expand their offerings by importing organic products. Live Organic is a distributor and wholesaler of mostly imported organic products. "From a retail perspective the concept is new but it is clearly growing," said Baaklini. Since 2010, the shop has seen an average annual growth of at least 30 percent and has expanded to three additional branches in Ashrafieh, Zouk, and Hamra.

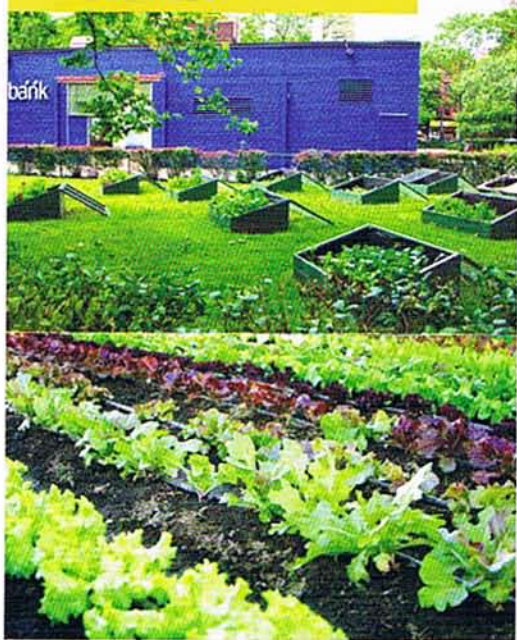
### TAKING THE ORGANIC ROAD

To go fully organic, a typical farm needs between three and five years. "It is not a complicated process because certification bodies give the producers a plan and guide them to implement it," said Baaklini. LibanCert provides both certification and inspection. The implementation of green practices includes a checklist of producers' tasks from preparing to plant crops, tending and harvesting these crops, and packaging and handling their produce. Producers should determine how they can best modify their practices and reduce risks without compromising the organic quality of their produce. Adequate measures should be taken to improve hygiene, promote safe practices and limit disease. Producers should identify areas where the quality and safety of their product may be affected. These can include poor soil quality, the presence of pests and animals, or difficult access to water. At later stages, factors like cost efficiency of green packaging (such as bleach-free, recycled corrugated cardboard) and low-emission transportation should also be considered. Finally, green distribution and marketing methods should be considered.



### STARTING FROM THE SOIL...

Organic agriculture begins in a natural soil that is free of modifications such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. "Chemical fertilizers pollute the ground water and the soil.



This generates soil diseases which affect the taste of food and cannot be easily contained," said Salameh. Fertilizers also affect the entire ecosystem since they kill the small insects and animals that compose the food chain. Natural alternatives include animal manure or compost. Compost is a natural fertilizer made from green food waste. "Chemical fertilizers take several months to break down, while organic fertilizers give nutrients to the soil for many years ahead," said LibanCert Inspector Hiba Fawaz. Care is required even when using organic fertilizers. Producers who use manure should cover it after application so as not to physically contaminate the product from irrigation splash or rain. A minimum of 120 days should be allowed between manure application and fruit or vegetable harvest. The market offers a wide range of safe fertilizers from suppliers such as Debbeh Group, BW Holding, and Bayer. A list of these fertilizers is available from LibanCert. "The most important thing is to make sure that the fertilizer is labeled organic," said Salameh.

### ... TENDING THE CROPS...

Producers should use drip or sprinkle irrigation instead of traditional water pouring to ensure plants receive the right amount of nutrient-filled water they need, with no waste. "This allows you to always be in control of the water that you use, decreasing and regulating its flow based on your needs. It also allows fertilizers to spread into the ground more efficiently," said Fawaz. Producers should also consider long-term sustainability. "If there is a nearby river, it should be used for irrigation instead of groundwater," said Fady Abou Fayyad, Head of the 'Agriculture and Agro-

industries' department at the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. "Groundwater is like a well. It has limited capacity. Going beyond it can add pressure to sea water, which brings in saltwater to the groundwater," said Abou Fayyad. Deciding when and how to spray is also critical. "Insects have different levels of development and producers should take spraying decisions based on them, not randomly," said Abou Fayyad. Pesticides can be replaced with natural alternatives. "Planting lavender allows birds and ladybugs to build their nests and to naturally feed on harmful insects found on trees," said Salameh. Natural pesticides are available commercially or can be homemade at little cost.

### ... AND REAPING THE HARVEST

The growing presence of organic producers and suppliers is stimulating the agricultural and industrial sectors. Products that are safer, tastier, and locally produced are more widely available to consumers with increasing awareness and appetite for such goods. The sooner local producers engage in organic practices, the better. Benefits include reduced health risks, added revenues, and a competitive edge. More research to improve quality and yields without sacrificing environmental stewardship means farms can produce more with less. Initial investments in organic farming will have positive returns through improved efficiency when the new practices become recurring standards. Producers should make sure they document all steps implemented throughout the entire process. This includes listing previous practices, new modifications, and risk monitoring measures, along with their results. A law is currently being prepared to organize the sector. The law will protect both farmers and end users by imposing regulations on key players.



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