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27. A new measure of food safety

Index for calculating pesticide content gets mixed response

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Illustration: Photo and Chart

Caption: PHOTOS BY PAUL BUCKOWSKI/TIMES UNION KARISA CENTANNI, education coordinator at Honest Weight Food Co-op, says consumers do well to buy from local food producers. A FOOD safety group says that onions such as these at Albany's Honest Weight Food Co-op are a good choice for consumers concerned about pesticides.

By JULIE A. **VARUGHESE**
Special to the Times Union

Does it pay to have thick skin?

For hardy produce, like mangoes, the outer covering helps keep chemicals from penetrating the succulent flesh inside, according to the Environmental Working Group, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog organization. Although the group recommends organic produce, it can be difficult to find and more expensive than conventional produce. So the group used government data to create a ranking of non-organically grown fruits and vegetables based on factors such as the level and number of pesticides detected.

But that's not enough to convince Joyce Recor. The Berne resident, who has bought organic for a decade, said she will continue to do so regardless of new information presented to her.

"I would like to see organic take over the world," she said.

The Working Group believes children and women of childbearing age should avoid conventional produce whenever possible.

"Pesticides are designed to be toxic," said spokeswoman Jovana Ruzicic.

"Pesticides are dangerous, and we don't think people being exposed to them is a good idea."

And peeling a potato or apple wastes valuable nutrients.

Consumers have become more cautious in recent years about the dangers of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers lurking in conventional produce. Organic produce has increased in popularity, with sales rising 20 percent annually since the 1990s, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Craig Minola, an environmental scientist for Organic Consumers Association in Minnesota, said hardy vegetables such as onions don't absorb chemicals as easily as less hardy types like sweet bell peppers.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency sets limits on the maximum amount of pesticide residue in or on each product, according to its Web site. It considers the toxicity of each pesticide, how much and how often the pesticide is applied, and how much residue the food retains.

Those limits are enforced by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which monitors most domestically produced and imported foods traveling in interstate commerce.

State governments also can prohibit the use of an EPA-approved pesticide.

Still, adherents of organics, such as Karisa Centanni, education coordinator at the Honest Weight Food Co-op in Albany, say buying conventional or organic is a personal choice.

"People have different chemical sensitivities - people do respond differently to pesticides," Centanni said.

She said buying from local farmers whose practices you know is the best way of ensuring quality produce. Curt Petzoldt, assistant director of the Cornell Cooperative Extension Integrated Pest Management program, said he hasn't seen the Environmental Working Group's ranking, but the matter isn't simply about the thickness of skin.

He said informal trials showed the amount of residue levels depended on when pesticides were applied. "But some people don't want to accept any residues at all."

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Factbox: Safety measure Here is an abridged version of the Environmental Working Group's ranking of conventionally grown fruits and vegetables. HIGHER PESTICIDE LOAD peach apple sweet bell pepper celery nectarine LOWER PESTICIDE LOAD onion avocado sweet corn (frozen) pineapple mango For the full list, visit <http://www.foodnews.org>.