

QUESTIONS TO ASK A PRODUCE FARMER

ASKING QUESTIONS is the best way to ensure that you're purchasing sustainably raised, healthy foods, and supporting sustainable farmers. Here are some questions to get you started.

WHAT PEST CONTROL METHODS DO YOU USE ON YOUR FARM?

Organic and biodynamic farmers have shown that it is not necessary to use chemical herbicides and pesticides in order to produce healthy, nutritious produce. There are many safe and effective pest control methods that farmers can use, rather than harmful chemicals. If possible, you should avoid buying produce from farmers who apply harmful chemicals to their crops.

WHAT TYPE OF FERTILIZERS DO YOU USE?

Chemical fertilizers are intended to increase growth and yield in vegetable crops but their use is entirely unnecessary, and harmful to the consumer. There are many effective and safe ways to fertilize soil, including with compost or with manure from sustainable pasture-based farms.

DO YOU GROW ANY HEIRLOOM VARIETIES?

While it's not necessarily an indicator of environmental sustainability, whether or not a farmer grows heirloom varieties is still an important question. Farmers who choose to grow heirloom fruits and vegetables help to preserve genetic diversity by ensuring that these unique plant varieties do not become extinct. Heirloom vegetables have been passed down for generations, and are treasured for their unique and delicious flavors, textures and stories. If a farmer doesn't grow any heirloom vegetables, ask them to consider doing so next season. Most farmers are just trying to meet the demands and desires of their customers.

HOW MANY DIFFERENT TYPES OF PRODUCE DO YOU GROW?

Crop diversity is a good indicator of sustainability when

it comes to produce farming. Many sustainable farmers rotate crops between different fields, allowing those not under production to lie fallow and recover under a cover crop. You want your farmer to tell you that they grow a diversity of

crops each season. However, some sustainable farmers do focus on a particular crop. If so, there are other issues to consider, such as crop rotation.

IS YOUR FARM CERTIFIED ORGANIC, BIODYNAMIC OR NATURALLY GROWN?

If a farm's products are certified with a third party label, such as Demeter (biodynamic), USDA Organic, or Certified Naturally Grown, some of the work is done for you. You may want to research what the certifying organizations are looking for, and what each type of certification actually means, but many of the questions listed above may be answered for you. It's important to remember, however, that some farmers choose not to certify for financial or political reasons. This does not mean that you shouldn't support them. It doesn't mean that they are not using organic or sustainable methods. It does mean that the responsibility lies with you to find out how they farm. Most farmers who choose not to have their produce certified will be willing to explain why, and to answer your questions.

NOTE: Sustainable farmers are very open about how they raise their animals and grow their fruits and vegetables. Consider asking to visit their farms to see exactly how the animals are raised and how their produce is grown. Many farmers welcome visitors. If you purchase products from a company advertising that it distributes sustainably raised foods from family farmers and ranchers, ask for their written standards for their products. If they aren't willing to share these with you, you may want to think twice about buying from them.

