

PLANET FOOD

January 2002

ORANGES

EDITORIAL – January 2002



I love freshly squeezed orange juice for breakfast. This means we get through a lot of oranges and have become quite expert about the different tastes and varieties. Sometimes we splash out and buy organic oranges and I am convinced they do taste better. Having researched this article I am even more keen to buy organic than before.

One of the problems with getting through so many oranges is the amount of orange skins we have to dispose of – too many in the compost makes it over acidic. But we have found a solution! We put the orange skins on a baking tray in the plate-warming oven of our Aga. The next day they are dried out and smelling of marmalade. We then put them into a basket by the fire and use them as fire-lighters.

ORGANIC ORANGES ARE BEST!

To get one glass of orange juice it takes 1,000 glasses of water for irrigation, 22 glasses for processing and 2 glasses of diesel fuel. Surprisingly organic oranges require less irrigation than non-organic ones. This is because organic orange growers have grasses, herbs and plants growing between the trees, which not only protects the soil from erosion but also helps conserve the moisture.

Conventional growers tend to kill all the plant life between the trees leaving dead vegetation or bare earth. They then put on fertilisers, quite often polluting the waterways and decreasing soil fertility. Organic growers feed the soil with compost – recycled waste materials – so that they can build up the fertility of the soil and sustain the crop.

The main pest problem for European orange growers is the Mediterranean fruit fly, which creates little black holes in the fruit and makes them rot. Some pretty nasty chemicals are used to protect the fruit, including 2,4-D, which is suspected to be a hormone disrupter. According to government data in 1999, 94% of oranges sampled contained pesticide residues.

Organic growers try working with nature to tackle pests. Their approach is not to try and wipe out the pest altogether but reduce their ability to damage the fruit. They do this with a mixture of diversionary tactics such as pheromones, encouraging natural predators and traps that the fruit fly will get stuck to.

Organic oranges grow slower than conventional ones. This means that they effectively have more 'orange' in them, a higher sugar level and more dry matter. New research and commercial anecdotal evidence is leading growers to believe that this means organic oranges actually last longer once harvested. Given that conventional oranges are treated with fungicides in the wax coating, to help preserve them, this is a surprising discovery.

Peter Segger from **Organic Farm Foods** thinks that the waxing of fruit, which is not permitted under organic standards, may also affect the taste. He suspects that by slowing down the respiration of the fruit, through waxing, the inside flesh is very slowly composting. And he argues that almost all organic fruit, if grown properly, will taste better, even though it is easier to tell the difference in some produce than others.

Organic oranges from supermarkets tend to cost about 20-25% more. But the price differential might be even more through independent green grocers because they are less likely to benefit with economies of scale.

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ORANGE VARIETIES

There is not a tremendous range of orange varieties on the market. What is available is generally dictated by season. *Nave/s* and their sub-varieties come early. They are sweet but have a shorter shelf life. The *Valencias* come later and are particularly good for juicing.

Interestingly, the smaller red Sicilian oranges, called *Moro*, have the highest levels of Vitamins C and E, of any fruit in the world. They are fantastic, but only available for a very short time.

New varieties are being developed though. One called the *Kara Kara* won't be on the market for a few years but is very sweet, red fleshed with a tinge of orange and has a blushed skin, rather like a grapefruit.

CUBAN ORANGES

Eileen Maybin from the [Fairtrade Foundation](#) has just come back from visiting some Cuban orange growers. She says that what is really exciting is seeing how the workers are participating in deciding where the extra money in 'social premiums' is spent.

Farms participating in the fair trade scheme, not only get paid a steady price for their produce, usually more than would otherwise get, but also get paid a 'social premium' to invest in a community initiative. Both the co-operatives visited by Eileen decided that they would like a canteen and social centre, where they could meet and socialise.

The Fairtrade Foundation work with small producers in developing countries enabling them to get a fair price for what they produce. Although the fair trade market is small, it can be the key factor in survival, for some producers and farm workers.

Through the extra money they have received, the Cuban orange farmers have managed to invest in spare parts for their antiquated Russian vehicles, improve on their irrigation systems and start up a tree nursery so they can plant new varieties of citrus trees.

Traditionally fertiliser, spare parts and petrol had been bought on a barter arrangement with the countries in the Soviet block. When the system collapsed in the 1990s, this was not possible. The orange growers realise that this may now give them an advantage in the organic market, because they have been forced to use a minimal amount of chemicals. They are now piloting 13 acres of organic orange trees to see how they do.

Although many fair trade producers are not yet organic, demand could well push them in that direction. And many organic producers are working to fair trade practice. Legislation may not push these two principles to merge but in practice this may well be the way they go.

ORANGE CONTACTS

FAIRTRADE FOUNDATION

Tel: 0207 405 5942

www.qn.apc.org/fairtrade

Some orange growers have the fair trade mark awarded by the Fairtrade Foundation..

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH REAL FOOD CAMPAIGN 0207 490 1555

They have information on pesticide residues. www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/real_food

ORGANIC GROWERS ASSOCIATION

01570 423 099

Peter Segger works at the Organic Growers Association and also runs Organic Farm Foods, which is an organic fruit wholesaler. www.organicfarmfoods.co.uk

SOIL ASSOCIATION

0117 929 0661

www.soilassociation.org

Organic oranges sold in this country need to be certified within the EU. The Soil Association are one of the certifying bodies. .

SUSTAIN

0207 837 1228

www.sustain.org

Produced a report on oranges called '*Taking the Pith*', available for £5.00. It is sub-titled 'The impact of the production and consumption of oranges and orange juice on people and the environment.'