

# British Columbians most likely to buy organic, report says

## But fast-growing sector of little benefit to B.C. growers

BY RANDY SHORE, VANCOUVER SUN    APRIL 14, 2013

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Eternal Abundance is an organic grocery and cafe combination, stocking both certified organic produce and uncertified local produce for consumers who increasingly value local over organic. Alexandra Brigham, store owner, places the produce as these garlic scapes twisted around her wrist.

**Photograph by:** Kim Stallknecht, Vancouver Sun

The value of organic products sold in Canada now tops \$3.7 billion — up from \$2.7 billion in 2010 — and British Columbians are the most committed buyers, new research reveals.

British Columbians are about twice as likely as other Canadians to buy organic foods and beverages, accounting for 22 per cent of national sales, according to the BC Organic Market Report of the Canada Organic Trade Association. Sixty-six per cent of us buy organic products at least weekly, and 75 per cent of parents with children under two at home.

Sales of organic foods and beverages from major retailers, food service businesses and farm-direct are about \$3 billion annually, compared with \$1 billion in 2006, according to the study's author Shauna MacKinnon, COTA projects and development manager. Sales of non-food products and sales for export account for another \$700 million.

"The organic food and beverage market in Canada has tripled," said MacKinnon.

The number of farms in B.C. reporting organic sales to Census Canada has not grown appreciably during that time, from 452 in 2006 to just under 500 today. Certified organic growers represent only a

small fraction of B.C.'s 19,759 farms.

The census does not collect data on changes in the amount of organic produce grown on those farms. COTA will release a detailed report on organic production later this year.

"What I can tell you is that farmers markets sales have grown 147 per cent between 2006 and 2012," said MacKinnon. "We estimate that 40 per cent of all sales at farmers markets are from certified organic vendors."

Organic vendors reported \$45.5 million in sales at farmers markets in 2012.

"As the local food market in B.C. has taken off, organic has been a huge part of that," she said. "B.C. is way ahead of the rest of the country in organic growing — in Ontario in 2011, only 10 per cent of farmers market sales were organic."

Organic products represent 1.7 per cent of national food and beverage sales.

While some certified organic products are more expensive than their conventional counterparts, many categories are converging in price, MacKinnon said.

Packaged foods such as boxed salads, soy drinks, coffee, pasta and cereal are close to or below the price of traditional products, she said.

"Consumers don't seem to mind a slight premium. These are some of the top sales categories in terms of sales," she said.

British Columbians are enthusiastic consumers of organic eggs, which are close in price to other cage-free categories such as free range and free run.

The biggest price premiums paid for organic products are for dairy — a relatively popular category with consumers — and meat.

Higher standards for sustainability, biodiversity and animal welfare in the organic meat and dairy industry drives the price difference, but according to a study cited by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, consumers who choose these products are willing to bear the extra cost and tend to be higher-income earners.

Fresh fruits and vegetables represent about 40 per cent of all organic sales, despite price premiums that range from five to 50 per cent.

Organic foods are produced without the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Organic fruit and vegetable production is typically more labour intensive and may necessitate extra costs because the lower volumes of produce preclude the efficiencies achieved by larger conventional farms and processors.

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