

The average American is overfed and undernourished, and our public health suffers as a consequence.

High yields and jumbo produce deliver more water, starch, and sugar per serving, but less vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.



STILL NO FREE LUNCH

TODAY'S BUMPER YIELDS OF FRUITS, VEGETABLES AND GRAINS DELIVER FEWER NUTRIENTS AND LESS INTENSE FLAVORS

Today's farmers raise many more bushels of corn, pecks of apples, and pounds of broccoli from a given piece of land than they did decades ago. In fact, over the past 50 years, farmers have doubled or tripled the yield of most major grains, fruits and vegetables. Higher yields have been made possible by the combination of new plant varieties and increasing reliance on synthetic fertilizer, pesticides, irrigation, and sophisticated machinery.

But as yields have been pushed higher, nutrient density has often slipped. Ounce for ounce, today's high-yield crops are less nutritious and deliver fewer nutrients per serving and calorie consumed, according to a report from The Organic Center entitled "Still No Free Lunch: Nutrient levels in U.S. food supply eroded by pursuit of high yields."

NUTRIENT DENSITY - a measure of the concentration of nutrients per ounce, per serving, or per calorie of food.

For example, there have been double-digit percentage declines of iron, calcium, selenium and other vital nutrients in many contemporary, high-yield crops compared to older varieties and/or lower-yielding fields. In general, the higher the yield of wheat, corn and

soybeans, the lower the protein and oil content. High tomato yields come with lower levels of vitamin C and the cancer-fighting compounds lycopene and betacarotene.

Higher levels of production on livestock farms have also resulted in erosion of nutrient density. For example, the average amount of milk produced by a dairy cow has quadrupled in the last century to roughly 24,000 pounds today. But this milk is less concentrated with fat, protein, and heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids

Nutrient decline has occurred because the focus of plant and animal breeders, farmers, and agribusiness has been on increasing yields, not on food nutritional quality. The reason for this focus is clear – farm commodity markets, federal farm policy, and those funding agricultural research have rewarded yield increases above all else.

Why is renewed focus on nutritional quality so important? Because improving the nutritional quality of our crops on a per serving basis is a necessary step in addressing larger nutrition and health problems. Farmers and the food industry must be challenged to deliver more nutrition per calorie consumed, and government should support farming systems that move in this direction.



EAT MORE CALORIES TO GET THE SAME NUTRITION??

"To get our recommended daily allowance of nutrients, we have to eat many more slices of bread today than people had to eat in the past," says Brian Halweil, a senior researcher at the WorldWatch Institute and the "Still No Free Lunch" author. "Less nutrition per calorie consumed affects consumers in much the same way as monetary inflation. We have more food, but it's worth less in terms of nutritional value."

Further erosion in nutrient density should be avoided because Americans need to consume foods that deliver more nutrients per calorie consumed. Science has yet to identify, much less understand, the nutritional benefits linked to thousands of phytochemicals produced by plants. Just as the loss of species erodes biological diversity, the erosion of nutrients in plants reduces the richness of the human diet, and along with it, food's ability to promote healthy development and graceful aging.

Plus, the relative levels, or ratios of nutrients in food, may also play important roles in human nutrition and health promotion. Modern farming has greatly changed the balance across nutrients in food, with little understanding of the consequences.



IMPACTS ON TASTE

Part of what gives foods their flavor and aroma are the same antioxidant nutrients that help protect plants against insects, diseases, and other sources of environmental stress. Tomato varieties that score highest in flavor tests have higher levels of antioxidants. As tomato yields increase, the density of these compounds decreases.



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Solutions and Alternatives

Organic farming is one approach that can help reverse the trend towards lower nutrient concentrations. The difference in nutrient density in organic food, compared to conventionally grown crops, ranges from a few percent to sometimes over 20 percent for certain minerals, and on average, about 30 percent for antioxidants. A study at Washington State University compared the mineral content of wheat grown organically and conventionally, and found that the organic crops had higher concentrations of copper (16 percent), magnesium (5 percent), manganese (3 percent), phosphorus (7 percent), and zinc (8 percent).

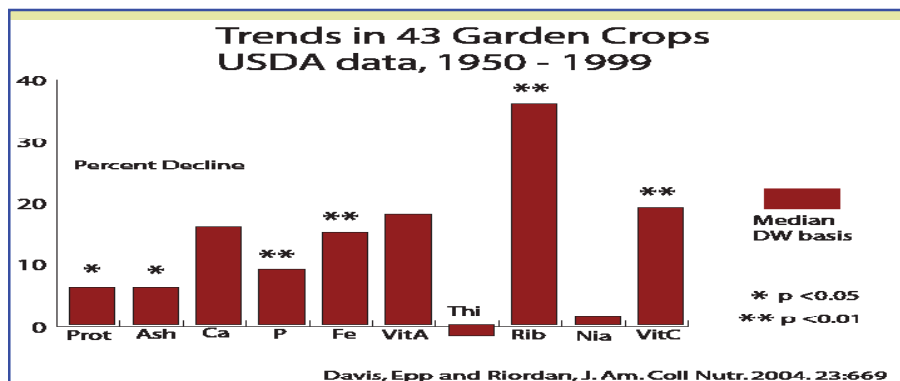
Although organic farming usually results in somewhat lower yields, it can deliver clear-cut food quality and safety advantages. Organic crops are, on average, more nutrient dense, they tend to taste better, store longer, and virtually eliminate pesticide dietary risks. This trifecta of benefits is particularly valuable for the young and old, and people fighting illness or trying to slow the progression of disease.

The Center is often asked whether the premium prices charged for organic food are worth it. In the case of ripe, delicious, and nutrient dense organic fruits and vegetables, the price premium is rarely a significant deterrent to sales. More and more consumers are yearning for old-school flavors. A lack of supply of ripe organic produce holds back sales far more often than premium prices.

HOW DO HIGH YIELDS SHORTCHANGE NUTRIENTS AND TASTE?

Breeders have programmed crops to, for instance, grow closer together (i.e., more plants per acre), produce larger fruits, and more grain and less straw per plant. Pushed to produce by chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation, modern plant varieties also tend to grow faster and reach a larger size compared to varieties grown in lower-yield systems. One reason is that faster-growing crops have less time to extract nutrients from the soil and move them up stalks and into the leaves and portions of a crop that the farmer harvests and a consumer eats.

The result? Modern, high-yield varieties tend to devote less energy to sinking deep roots and generating health-promoting phytochemicals, including some vitamins and hundreds of antioxidants. There still is no free lunch -- crops that are bred primarily for higher yields cannot be expected to also excel at meeting other goals, such as enhancing nutrient density and taste, warding off disease, and resisting drought.



Access more information on eroding nutrient levels and the Critical Issue Report, "Still No Free Lunch: Nutrient levels in the U.S. food supply eroded by pursuit of high yields" at www.organic-center.org under TOC Reports, or contact Dr. Charles Benbrook, at cbenbrook@organic-center.org.



The Organic Center
P.O. Box 20513
Boulder, CO 80308
(303) 499-1840

sometimes the greatest ideas are the simplest.

www.organic-center.org