



# Ecosystem Insights

Advice and Opinions for Organic, Biodynamic, & Holistic Orchardists

## *Tripwires & Nebulous Phrases*

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**T**here's a somewhat famous story about Van Halen that goes like this: In every Van Halen concert contract, there was a clause that stated that there shall be no brown M&Ms in the band's dressing rooms. The clause was placed there to ensure that the concert promoter read the entire contract. If the band found brown M&Ms, then they knew the promoter hadn't read the contract and could only wonder what else had been missed.

Our current farming and food systems are replete with nebulous phrases that people should view as tripwires, except that you aren't supposed to ask questions or find them. So you better be paying attention. This applies whether you're a farmer and the "latest and greatest" cure-all just hit the market, or you're a consumer faced with the myriad labels that speak to organic, natural, and so on. On the surface they seem relatively innocuous, but as you begin to peel back the onion, you realize that there's more to the story. Nothing is ever as it seems.

Natural, for example, is a term that should mean something fairly obvious, Yet, in fact, natural can legally mean anything from my definition of natural (made from nature) to a concoction of ingredients that mimic something resembling, say, raspberry flavor. Organic is a term defined by standards created by the USDA. Although many growers and food producers may comply with the letter of the law. In fact, there are some inputs and practices that just shouldn't be allowed. They are only there to enhance profitability for large corporate farms, when morally, ethically and even in some cases horticulturally, they just don't make sense. Not all natural and organic food is created equal.

Before the USDA passed the National Organic Practices standards, there was just organic. As organic grew in popularity some growers took advantage of the fact that there were no regulations, pushing the USDA to get involved and pass some guidelines. Surely everyone benefited from the blossoming of the organic consumer market, but it left many growers and consumers grappling with the incongruity between the organic certification process and a real commitment to the planet.

Many farmers grow food organically and then some (beyond organic) because they believe in a true, transparent organic philosophy, but don't certify their farms or products. They may use organic, biodynamic, and holistic production methods regardless of whether it complies with the USDA Organic certification standards because it complies with what they feel are the core tenets of an organic farming ethos. As well, there are many farmers that are certified organic, but aren't the best stewards of the land. Sometimes a label isn't all it's cracked up to be.

As we get geared up for this season, you will see and hear of many "new" revolutionary products that will solve all your problems. As in all cases, the simplest answer is usually the best. Good soil health isn't a national secret - feed the earth good stuff and it will thrive. There are many good new products that can help move things in the right direction and ensure a productive farm, especially if you're working to revive a worn out piece of ground or a farm that was farmed conventionally. But don't get tripped up. Read the label, ask questions, and know your science - it's really that simple. Unfortunately, neither snake oil nor brown M&Ms go out of fashion.

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