

Organic Chinese Herbs

Spring Wind Herbs has been working with various companies in China for the past several years to try to develop a reliable source of organic Chinese herbs. In the past year much progress has been made and we will now be able to offer a growing number of herbs in organic form. We work with companies that work directly with the growers. They train and support the growers and pay certification costs. They also guarantee the farmer that they will buy their products if organic farming methods are followed. Farmers, once introduced to organic, are much happier and report that their families are healthier and they feel better about what they do.

Pricing for organic herbs is usually considerably higher than the conventional herb because of costs associated with organic certification at both the farm and the herb handling facilities and because of the reduced yields and increased labor costs of natural farming. I would like to suggest several reasons why the Chinese medicine community should support organic.

Why support organic?

❖ ***The earth is an integrated body. Pesticides and chemical fertilizers spread beyond the farm.***

By buying organic we promote a less toxic environment for all living things. Industrial agriculture doesn't only pollute farmland and farm workers; it also wreaks havoc on the environment downstream. Pesticide drift affects non-farm communities with odorless and invisible poisons. Synthetic fertilizer drifting downstream is the main culprit for dead zones in delicate ocean environments.

❖ ***Pesticides are bad for babies and other living things.***

Before a mother first nurses her newborn, the toxic risk from pesticides has already begun. Studies show that infants are exposed to hundreds of harmful chemicals even before they are born. According to the National Academy of Science, "neurologic and behavioral effects may result from low-level exposure to pesticides." Numerous studies show that pesticides can adversely affect the nervous system, increase the risk of cancer, and decrease fertility. By supporting organic herb farming we are helping the Chinese to develop a sustainable system that will benefit the whole population. Success in organic herb farming could have a positive effect on other farming as well and reduce pesticide exposure to old and young alike.

❖ ***Mono-cropping and fertilizer dependency depletes and erodes the top soil.***

Feeding the soil with organic matter instead of ammonia and other synthetic fertilizers has proven to increase nutrients in produce, with higher levels of vitamins and minerals found in organic food, according to the 2005 study, "Elevating Antioxidant levels in food through organic farming and food processing,"ⁱ If organic practices help foods it surely must help herbs.

❖ ***Herbs the way the classics intended.***

Centuries ago in China there were no chemical pesticides, no chemical fertilizers and surely no genetically modified herbs. Organic is the only de facto seal of assurance against these and other modern, lab-produced additions to our food supply, and the only food term with built in inspections and federal regulatory teeth. We are sure Zhang Zhong-Jing, Zhu Dan-Xi and the rest of the gang only bought organic!

❖ ***Stop pesticides at the source.***

Without organic we have little control over the methods used to produce the herbs we purchase. Lacking this, our recourse is to test incoming herbs for an ever increasing list of pesticides. Our experience at Spring Wind is that we discover new pesticides in use each year. This fall harvest (2008) for example, we found three new pesticides in more than ten lots of Gou Qi Zi (finally, the eleventh batch was pesticide-free). Two of these are new pesticides that were not even on our list of the 250 that we regularly test for and had we not been alerted to them by our organic growers we would not have run the special pesticide screens needed to detect them. We are shooting at a shifting target and though we have what we believe is the most thorough testing program in the industry, there is no way to test each item for every possible pesticide (there are thousands of pesticides). We need the assurance that organic provides in addition to our own strict pesticide testing program.

We are now in the formative stage of the organic herb movement in China. It will only succeed with practitioner support. Does your herb company support organic? If we support the organic herb movement the market will develop, regulation will improve, and prices will eventually drop.

Andrew Ellis

Spring Wind Herbs, Inc.



Andy with grower (left) and field supervisor at organic Chai Hu field in northern China.

¹ Organic Center State of Science Review (1.05)