

Over the last several years, the term “organic” has developed into quite a buzzword. Whether it’s referencing produce on grocery store shelves or skin care at your spa, there’s no question that the mere mention of the word organic triggers consumers to think “better.” But a myriad of questions surround what *exactly* the term organic means, and what spa owners need to know if being green is important to their business.

Precisely how are organic ingredients grown? How do skincare companies source ingredients and guarantee that they’re organic? What are the differences between products labeled “all-natural,” “organically sourced” or “contains organic ingredients”? What can technically be deemed organic, and who gets to determine which products deserve this heavyweight moniker? Read on for all the answers, and for help in understanding the true meaning behind an organic label.

A man in a red plaid shirt and blue jeans is seen from behind, carrying a large wooden basket filled with green herbs on his back. He is standing in a lush green field with various plants and trees in the background. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Ground Control

We untangle what growing “organic” ingredients really means—and precisely how skincare companies can use the term.

By Rachel Kossman



FARM FOR THOUGHT

"The concept of organic farming is simple: it's exactly how farming has been practiced for nearly our entire history as humans," says Vida Karamooz, CEO of Blue Beautifly, an organic skincare company based in Oakland, California. "At some point, people transitioned from living off of the wilderness to domestic farming, but it's the farming practices of the last 30 or 40 years that are the exception."

The exception to which Karamooz refers is today's **conventional or commercial farming methods**—the introduction of modern, industrialized farming practices that include the heavy use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, growth stimulants, hormones or antibiotics, as well as the development of genetically modified (GMO) crops. As for more natural farming methods, there are several types:

- **Wildcrafted** Plants, fruits and vegetables that are wildcrafted are found growing in nature, as opposed to being planted for harvest. A company can only officially harvest wildcrafted plants if it has been granted a license, which has to be renewed yearly. The plants must come from natural habitats that have been deemed chemical-free. To ensure proper picking methods and guarantee no over-harvesting, authority supervision is required.
- **Organic farming** The results of organic farming are what one might see at a local farmers market—produce comes directly from the grower, who can vouch for his farming and harvesting methods, although no certification is presented. In general, organic farming relies on techniques such as crop rotation, green manure, composting and biological pest control.
- **Biodynamic farming** Similar to organic farming, biodynamic farming is based on the lunar calendar. It involves farmers creating a diversified, balanced farm ecosystem that supplies plants with the maximum

amount of natural nutrients available. This method must be certified by Europe-based Demeter International and requires a constant human presence (in many cases, someone living on the land); an integration of livestock on the farm; reliance on hydro, wind or geothermal power; and a determined plot of wild, uncultivated land incorporated within the property.

- **Certified Organic farming** requires that an accredited certifying agent follows a specific list of standards to inspect and certify a farm. Whether the standards checklist is from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), EcoCert, Germany's BDIH, Demeter International or another official organization, these large entities and their contracted inspectors provide seals of approval based on the way in which a farm operates, plants and harvests.

It's important to recognize the difference between organic farming and Certified Organic farming. When a skincare company declares that an ingredient is "Certified Organic," the implication is that it was sourced from a Certified Organic farm. "Sometimes, small manufacturers can make truly organic products using clean, organic ingredients but they cannot afford the actual process of certification because it's so costly," explains Elina Fedotova, formulator and CEO of Elina Organics. "It's a hugely expensive process," confirms Karamooz. "Paying the USDA (in our case) is just one part of the puzzle; we also have to pay for the third-party approved inspector—their travel, time and report. Not to mention the constant record keeping and other procedures put in place to ensure compliance."

In other words, organic skincare products do exist with *and* without certification. But to truly understand the type of organic ingredients you're working with, you'll probably have to contact the manufacturer in order to learn more about their suppliers and manufacturing processes.

GROWING FOR CERTIFICATION

As a spa professional, you are (unfortunately) disconnected from the farming, harvesting and sourcing process required of skincare manufacturers. However, when partnering with the brands carried by your spa, it's crucial to ask questions about how the company's ingredients, organic or otherwise, are sourced.

Some skincare companies run their own farms, many in Europe and Australia, where organic standards are much stricter. Éminence operates organic and biodynamic farms in Hungary, where company founders Boldijarre and Attila Koronczay were born. "One of our brand's main advantages is that our manufacturing and product processing are performed within Europe, where guidelines are stricter to begin with," says Natalie Pergar, Éminence's lead skincare trainer.

Owning a farm enables manufacturers to control every step of the production process, and therefore guarantee that ingredients are wholly organic. "Each of our farm-grown herbs and flowers can be traced back to the exact date, day and hour they were picked," explains Sara LaBree, education manager with Jurlique, which owns an organic farm in the Adelaide Hills of South Australia. "Since we manually tend and pick all our ingredients, every flower, petal and leaf is inspected by hand."

It took three years for Ilike Organic Skin Care's farm in Hungary to become officially certified. Both BDIH and Hungária Öko Garancia, a Hungarian certification agency, certify Ilike's products, and each organization conducts a thorough, yearly audit of the brand's wildcrafting and farming methods, active ingredient processing, and the documentation regarding inactive ingredient sourcing. "BDIH also reviews our manufacturing processes and environmental hygiene and storage conditions, plus all of our package copy details and marketing communications," explains



Szilvia Hickman, owner and senior vice president of Szép Élet, exclusive distributor of Ilike Organic Skin Care.

Across the board, there are hundreds of requirements that organic farms must adhere to, all of which are determined by the certification organization. These rules can apply to everything from the types of cleaning formulas used on processing equipment to a restriction on utilizing manure from industrial animal farms and conventionally raised animals.

If a manufacturer doesn't have the means to operate its own farms, it must work either directly with Certified Organic farms or with vendors, distributors and sourcing companies that have partnerships with Certified Organic farms. "We, like many organic skincare companies, don't have the resources to go to farmers ourselves, especially those on the other side of the world," explains Karamooz. In a similar position is Karen Bock, owner of ColorStrokes Cosmetics, a division of Brushes by Karen, who formulates her Natural Organic Cosmetics with Certified Organic ingredients. "Because my products are private label, I need to keep my costs down, so becoming a Certified Organic operation wasn't realistic for me," she explains. Instead, manufacturers like these choose sourcing companies that work only with Certified Organic farms and have their own quality checks in place. "I purchase only Certified Organic ingredients but I do have to rely on the USDA to inspect my growers," explains Fedotova.

Shira Esthetics also depends on the USDA-provided list of verified farmers to purchase products for its Shir-Organic Select line. "We know that the Certified Organic approval and audit process is carried out by a third-party certifier each year," explains Shira Esthetics president Jerry Nezaría. This gives company leaders peace of mind that the farms they choose are indeed supplying genuinely organic products.

LABEL LINGO

As a skincare professional, you've seen the numerous claims that suppliers put on their product bottles. From "100% Organic" to "All Natural," the terms can be confusing, to say the least. "What upsets me is the wordplay," notes Sarajane Ward, creator of Plush Organic Skin Care. "So many brands say 'we're all-natural' or 'we use organic ingredients' and that's fine, but clients want to know *exactly* what they're putting on their skin."

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Gorgeous Gardens

These four spas have cultivated gardens just outside their doors in order to incorporate their very own organic ingredients into their spa's experiences and treatment menus.

The spa: Westward Look Wyndham Grand Resort and Spa in Tucson, Arizona



The gardener: Jeffery Schott, spa director

When did you plant your seedlings?

November 2014

What grows in your garden?

"We have at least 20 different herbs and plants" Schott explains. "Sage, thyme, several types of mint, rosemary and lemongrass; fig and calamondin trees; prickly pear; aloe vera;

blueberries; a cross-bred lemon-eucalyptus; plus non-medicinal plants that help attract butterflies and hummingbirds."

Why do guests love your greenery? "We planted our garden to provide an interactive, sensory experience," says the spa director. "Clients pick their own herbs for their treatments—they get a chance to smell, crush and taste them. The feedback has been amazing, and our body treatments alone increased by more than 40% last year because of the hand-picked garden ingredients."

The spa: Deer Lake Lodge Resort & Health Spa in Montgomery, Texas



The gardener:

Carrie Harmon, spa director

When did you plant your seedlings?

December 2013

What grows in your garden?

"In early 2014, we had a group of teachers visit us from Sedona, Arizona. They brought an aloe vera plant, which has since multiplied all over the property!" says Harmon. "We

also grow thyme, spearmint, lavender, oregano, sage and rosemary."

Why do guests love your greenery? "Our entire resort is built in converted shipping containers using refurbished materials, and we're very eco-friendly, so the garden fits in well with our spa. Guests love the aromatherapy and organic ingredient classes we teach outdoors. Many of them pluck sprigs of lavender to take to their rooms, or add oregano and rosemary to their meals. I tell them they can take whatever they'd like as long as they don't pick my plants clean!" she laughs.

The spa: Stoweflake Mountain Resort & Spa in Stowe, Vermont

The gardener: Surinda

Oberai Cavanagh, spa director

When did you plant your seedlings?

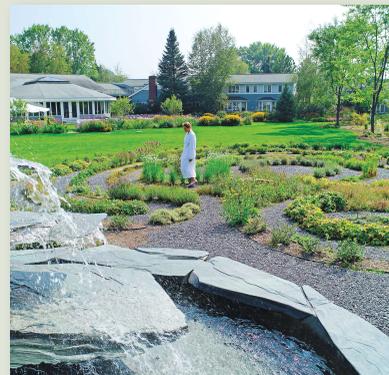
August 2003

What grows in your garden?

"We have a variety of herbs—sage, rosemary, thyme, lemon balm, calendula and mint, to name a few—plus crab apple trees, strawberry and blueberry plants," explains Cavanagh.

Why do guests love your greenery?

"Because we're up in northern Vermont, we face rather harsh growing conditions through much of the year," laments the spa director. "But we purposely chose plants that bloom in early spring and late fall, and guests appreciate that our labyrinth garden gives them an opportunity to be outside. They also love that we encourage them to pick the strawberries, blueberries and herbs to take home or eat while they're on site!"



The spa: Osmosis Day Spa Sanctuary in Freestone, California

The gardener:

Michael Stusser,

spa owner

When did you plant your seedlings?

July 1989

What grows in your garden?

"We have five distinct gardens on our 5.5-acre property,"

explains Stusser. "Within them we've planted a range of trees, including laceleaf maple, Monterey cypress and Japanese varieties of birch, maple, red and black pine. We also have creeping raspberry, wild currant, coffeeberry and elfin thyme."

Why do guests love your greenery? "We encourage all of our guests to visit the meditation garden, to take some time there to experience the palpable tranquility of the space and fully absorb the impact of their relaxing spa treatments," says the spa owner. "The spa includes guided meditation within its programming, and our day-long spa meditation retreats incorporate the garden as part of a full-day immersion into nature."





Lavender



Sea Buckthorn

Ingredient Spotlight

We're sure you've heard of this crop of flora, commonly incorporated into organic skincare formulations. But did you know these facts about each one?

Lavender

- Part of the mint family, there are nearly 40 plants that are technically classified as lavender.
- Because lavender grows and spreads so quickly, it's actually considered a weed in some areas of the world.
- The lavender bud is covered in tiny hairs, which contain the plant's highly prized essential oils.

Willow Bark

- Most commonly, it is derived from the bark of a white willow tree, which is native to Europe and Central Asia.
- White willow trees have inner and outer barks, which contain different compound concentrations.
- Willow trees are often planted on the borders of streams so their interlacing roots will protect the banks against the water's erosive effects.

Aloe Vera

- There are more than 240 aloe vera varieties that grow in arid regions of Africa, Asia, Europe and America.
- Aloe vera contains 18 amino acids.
- Aloe produces two substances, gel and latex. The gel is the clear, jelly substance within the leaf; the latex is yellow and comes from directly underneath the plant's skin. The latter can be deadly if consumed in large quantities.



Stonecrop

Sea Buckthorn

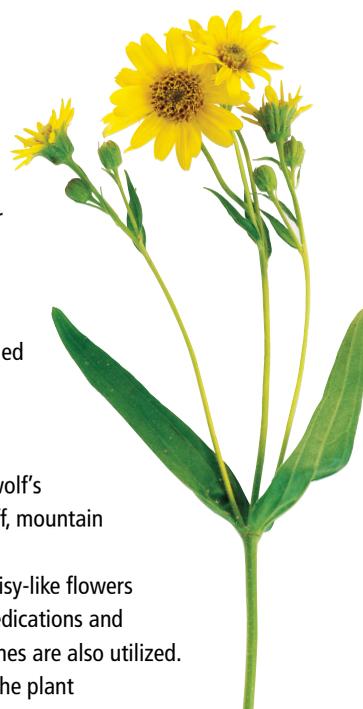
- Sea buckthorn—also known as sandthorn, sallowthorn and seaberry—is extremely dense, with stiff, thorny branches.
- The leaves, flowers and fruits of this deciduous shrub are used to produce medicine, skin care, jellies, juices, purees and sauces.
- The plant naturally contains vitamins A, B₁, B₂, B₆ and C.

Stonecrop

- The stonecrop family consists of nearly 600 succulent species.
- Stonecrops are low-growing plants that have tall, spiked blooms, swathed in rich nectar that attracts a variety of bees, moths and butterflies.
- There is only one wild stonecrop plant—all others are cultivated.

Licorice Root

- Most licorice is grown in Greece, Turkey and Asia.
- The plant's wrinkled, lengthy roots spread horizontally in the ground. They are harvested in the fall, two or three years after the seedling has been planted.
- Licorice plants produce pale blue-purple flowers; the fruits are contained in long pods with several seeds.



Arnica

Arnica

- Common names for arnica include wolf's bane, leopard's bane, mountain snuff, mountain tobacco and sneezewort.
- The plant produces bright yellow, daisy-like flowers that are dried and used to create medications and skin care; the plant's root and rhizomes are also utilized.
- Arnica can only be used topically—the plant is poisonous and can cause cardiac arrest and death if consumed.

Several years ago, there was a lot of speculation surrounding the term “natural”. “Back then, as long as the product’s ingredients came out of the ground, it was believed to be ‘natural.’ People didn’t consider what had been done to the earth that those ingredients grew from,” explains Pergar. “The bottom line is that almost nothing is really 100%

organic,” Pergar continues, referring to the preservatives and man-made ingredients added to extend shelf life.

Current USDA regulations will allow products that contain at least 95% organic ingredients to be deemed Certified Organic. “The remaining 5% must be on an approved list,” explains Nezarria.

“Look at the label and verify that the USDA logo *and* certifier information is on the bottle, because both are required to be displayed,” he says.

The most basic, and arguably most important, distinction is between a **Certified Organic ingredient** and a **Certified Organic product**. Both exist, but the difference between them is significant.

“If organic ingredients are used along with non-organic ingredients, then the product itself cannot be regarded as Certified Organic,” says LaBree. Remember that just because some ingredients are organic, that doesn’t mean *all* are. “A product made with a combination of organic extracts could easily contain synthetic preservatives or dyes,” says Hickman. Look for whether the product’s fragrance or perfume is synthetic or composed of organic essential oils.”

It’s worth noting that the word “organic” can only be used on a product if *none* of the plant sources are genetically modified. “When a product is labeled ‘100% organic’, ‘organic’, or just ‘made with organic ingredients’, even its non-organic ingredients cannot be produced from GMOs,” clarifies Rodolfo Ugelstad, scientific director for CA BOTANA. “These types of products only require 70% of the ingredients to be organic, but 100% must be non-GMO.”

The bottom line? If organic ingredients and products are important to your spa’s brand or your clients, ask questions to make sure that the brands you’re trusting are actually worthy of your trust. “Educate yourself,” emphasizes Pergar. “Be a smart esthetician: know your science, take the extra classes and absorb the additional knowledge. It’s easier if you know you’re doing your job in the best way possible.” ■

Rachel Kossman is DAYSPA’s associate editor.

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