Talking with your produce farmer

Here are some questions you might ask.

1. **What pest control methods do you use on your farm?** Pesticides are chemicals used to eliminate or control a variety of agricultural pests that can damage crops and livestock and reduce farm productivity. Their use damages the environment by polluting air, water, and soil, and threatens human health, causing neurological and endocrine system disorders, birth defects, cancer, and other diseases. Organic and biodynamic farmers have shown that it’s not necessary to use chemical pesticides and herbicides in order to produce healthful, nutritious produce. Sustainable practices include growing pest-resistant crop varieties, using predatory insects to kill plant-eating pests, employing mechanical pest traps, and eliminating pest nesting areas by plowing under harvested crops.
2. **What types of fertilizers do you use?** Synthetic fertilizers are intended to increase growth and yield in vegetable crops but their use is unnecessary and can be harmful to humans and the environment. There are many effective and safe ways to fertilize soil including the use of compost or manure from sustainable pasture-based farms.
3. **Do you use genetically engineered seeds on your farm?** Many concerns have been raised over the inadequate testing of the effects of genetic engineering on the environment and human health. Critics of genetic engineering believe that GE foods must be proven safe before they are sold to the public. Specific concerns over genetic engineering include allergic reactions, gene mutation, antibiotic resistance, loss of nutrition and environmental damage.
4. **Do you grow any heirloom varieties?** Heirloom fruits and vegetables have been passed down for generations, and are treasured for their unique and delicious flavors, textures, and stories. While not necessarily an indicator of environmental sustainability, a farmer’s choice to grow heirloom varieties is still important in that doing so helps preserve genetic diversity by ensuring that these unique plant varieties don’t become extinct. If a farmer doesn’t grow any heirloom vegetables, you might ask them to consider doing so next season. Most farmers are eager to meet the demands and desires of their customers.
5. **How many different types of produce do you grow?** Crop diversity is a good indicator of sustainability when it comes to produce farming. Many sustainable farmers rotate crops among different fields, allowing those not under production to lie fallow and recover under a cover crop. Ideally, a farm will grow a diversity of crops each season. However, some sustainable farmers do focus on a particular crop. If so, there are other issues to consider, such as crop rotation.
6. **Is your farm certified organic, biodynamic or naturally grown?** If a farm’s products are certified with a third-party label, such as Demeter (biodynamic), USDA Organic, or Certified Naturally Grown, some of the work is done for you. You may want to explore the criteria used by certifying organizations, and learn how their certification audits are conducted. Many of the questions above may be addressed by various certifications. It’s important to remember, however, that some farmers choose not to certify for financial or political reasons. This doesn’t mean that they’re not using organic or sustainable methods, or that you shouldn’t purchase from them. It does mean that the responsibility lies with you to find out how they farm. Most farmers who choose not to have their produce certified are willing to explain why and to answer your questions.

This pollen-for-thought gathered from <http://www.gracelinks.org/>

Talking with nurseries about the pollinator issue

1. Beyond Pesticides ([www.beyondpesticides.org](http://www.beyondpesticides.org)) has compiled a comprehensive directory of companies and organizations that sell organic seeds and plants to the general public. Included in this directory are seeds for vegetables, flowers, and herbs, as well as[**living plants**](http://www.beyondpesticides.org/programs/bee-protective-pollinators-and-pesticides/what-can-you-do/pollinator-friendly-seed-directory#Nurseries) and seedlings. Specific questions on each seller's seeds can be directed to their customer service line. The article includes an “ongoing project” for organic nurseries in Washington, D.C.; they asked inquired whether each nursery had organic plants, and who supplied them if they did not grow them themselves. Original article at <http://www.beyondpesticides.org/programs/bee-protective-pollinators-and-pesticides/what-can-you-do/pollinator-friendly-seed-directory>



1. One blog we located has some questions you might want to ask your local nurseries:

<http://ifnaturecouldtalk.com/pollinator-killing-plants-questions-for-your-nurseries>



1. You will find material on both sides of the **neonicotinoid** debate. Here is Xerces Society info:

<http://www.xerces.org/neonicotinoids-and-bees/>

and an opposing view:

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jon-entine/neonics-not-key-driver-of_b_6928578.html>

* All links discovered thanks to Deb Van Walsum