The Dirt: Consumers love buying local. However, consumers are also now influencing how farmers do their jobs. And sometimes this means new technology is being overlooked. Let's investigate...

More and more mindful consumers are getting to know the farmers in their area, attending farmers' markets, and supporting local growers. And while buying local and supporting your growers is very important, it's starting to dictate farming practices. Organic practices have been overemphasized. Thus growers have been avoiding some beneficial farming technologies.

Yes, organic farming is often safe and healthy - but, conventional farming is perhaps more safe. Conventional practices are often misrepresented. Conventional crops are often pitted against organic produce as the greater evil. As we discussed on D2D, conventional farmers create safe, healthy, and affordable produce. While organic crops are safe and healthy many consumers believe that organic is healthier because it doesn't require pesticide or herbicide. This impression is misguided. Conventional farming practices have traditionally been held to a higher sanitation standard than organic farming that uses manure.

Recently there have been several deadly outbreaks of e.coli, listeria and salmonella from organic producers who had not yet implemented Farm Modernization Safety Act (FMSA) sanitation practices. Moreover, the USDA and FDA reported that 99% of residues on the "dirty dozen", also known as the crops that are believed to require the most pesticides, were well below the safe levels for consumption. So why do conventional growers get such a bad rap?

Consumers in the US and Europe mistakenly believe that genetically modified foods aren't good for us. This misconception was born from a highly effective public relations campaign to protect European farmers from competition by "Frankenfoods". The consumer was shocked and scared into avoiding perfectly healthy food sources. This misconception has crept into not only consumer preferences but it's also influenced food certification standards.

While we know the customer is always right ... they may not have all their facts straight.

D2D supports consumers buying local (we wrote a post on the local movement previously) - but we want to make sure the local movement doesn't negatively impact the farmers we are supposed to be supporting. We don't tell doctors how to operate - we need to stop telling farmers how to farm.

The D2D team has visited many safe conventional farms that inevitably create more produce in a growing season - and ultimately offer their crops at a better price - because of their designated inputs. For example, Versailles Farm in Connecticut uses the French-intensive method with a combination of conventional and organic inputs to produce roughly 6 acres of food on 1.5 acres of land. Owners

Ingrid and Steve McMenamin are responsible stewards of the land. Steve invests in his soil and uses different technologies in order to create flavorful, healthy, and sustainable crops. He produces a variety of lettuce, along with tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, peppers, edible flowers and mushrooms.

This **best practices** approach combines new technology, like soil moisture and irrigation sensors with more old time techniques, like the broad fork, which is used to crack the soil to allow more oxygen in without disturbing the soil web. He also utilizes companion plantings, like marigold flowers, nasturtium, lavender, and dill in order to naturally fight off pests. For example, lavender repels cabbage worms. He can then harvest these companion plants for additional revenue. The flowers also help pollinate the bee hives Ingrid keeps at the farm. And while they aren't organically certified they hold Versailles Farm to the highest standards of plant culture, hygiene and flavor - they don't feel compelled to adopt a purely organic regime in order to get a badge.

"We grow for flavor rather than compliance. Versailles Farm takes a best practices approach in everything we do. If organic has a best practice we use it. Same goes for conventional techniques. Some may question how synthetic fertilizers effect the soil. We use both organic and synthetic inputs. We plant a cover crop and amend our soil with compost every year. We spoon-feed our tomatoes with synthetics because they're heavy feeders and the flavor is better. Our soil is healthy and the worms seem happy." (Steve McMenamin, Versailles Farms)

The successful farms are those who can marry the best techniques that are applicable to the crop, the soil, and the environment. It is not just one or the other - it can be both!

As we learned on Green Cay Farm in Florida, there are many challenges that farms face that would overtake the crops if farmers were required to use only specific inputs. There are many successes that conventional inputs allow these farmers to have.

Genetically modified technology, for example, is a significant development in agriculture that is not being used to its full potential by local growers. As Nancy Roe mentioned to us, she would like to use GM seeds but that could negatively affect her subscribers. If she were able to use genetically modified technology she would be able to apply 1 /3 less pesticide to her crops.

The health and quality of a farm's land is extremely important to farmers. If farmers don't manage their inputs properly they are wasting money, negatively affecting their crops, and hurting overall profitability. We must trust our farmers to do what is right for their land given their seasonal challenges, pest threats, and growing conditions. Get to know your farmers, and you will be pleasantly surprised at the care they take of their land - even if they aren't solely organic.

Bottom Line: Farmers, whether they are large or small scale, are stewards of the land. They know what their crops need in order to thrive. They need to be properly supported by consumers.