

Getting Organic to Look the Part

The U.S. Department of Agriculture allows producers to use natural food colors even if they aren't certified organic, although some purists argue that processors should do without until there's an organic alternative.

Products that use natural colors can bear the USDA Organic label. But they would have to use all organic ingredients, including organic colors, to label their products "100 percent organic." Here lies the dilemma, how do you get organic colors to look the part?

Beet farmers in Wisconsin are growing a variety of table beets chock full of deep red pigment for natural food coloring. Converting some to organic would be easy, said Irwin Goldman, professor of horticulture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

He and the other researchers have worked for decades to breed beets with a dense pigment called betalain. A regular table beet has about 150 grams of betalain; the beets used for color have about 1,250 grams.

"It's nearly black when you cut it open," Mr. Goldman said. The beet color works well in yogurt, ice cream and candy, he said, but doesn't hold up in baked goods.

Stabilizing color is a challenge with many natural sources, said Stefan Hake, chief executive of GNT USA, a Tarrytown and N.Y. company that produces natural food colorings.

Prime pigments can come from elderberries, cherries, strawberries, pineapple, pumpkin, red cabbage, orange carrots and even purple carrots, but understanding their chemistry is key.

For example, put blueberry juice into a glass of Sprite or 7Up, and it turns red, he said. Put blueberry juice in milk, and the color shifts towards the bluish side, and it's gray by the end of the day.

"It's not just how colors work," he said "It's how does it interact with what you're adding it to."

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Sources Include: Paula Lavigne, The Dallas Morning News