



**Crop Protection Research Institute Research Note #2:
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The Marketing Myths of Store Wars

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Millions of Americans have recently watched a short animated internet film that promotes organic food. The film, *Store Wars* (www.storewars.org), is a seemingly humorous spoof of *Star Wars* that encourages the audience to become part of the organic rebellion and turn away from the “evil” food empire created with pesticides. Like all good propaganda films, *Store Wars* rewrites history and conveniently leaves out facts that would mar the marketing message of the goodness of organics.

Marketing Myth #1: For thousands of generations, crops existed in harmony with nature with no need for pesticides, and then pesticides took farming to the dark side.

The truth is that there has never been a time or place on earth where there was harmony between crops and nature. Nature has a cruel dark side with just one rule—survival of the fittest. The environment is teeming with organisms that prey on crop plants. Thousands of species of insects, fungi, and bacteria penetrate and suck the life out of crops. Every acre of soil is loaded with millions of seeds of plants that we cannot eat. These species want to inhabit the same space that farmers plant with edible crops. If not removed, these inedible weeds would steal the light, space and nutrients that edible crops need to prosper. For thousands of years, millions of people spent their lives pulling weeds by hand. It was not harmonious – it was killing on a mass scale. Kids, do you know why you have summer vacations from school? You were needed in the old days to pull weeds. Want to go back? Farmers started using chemicals to kill weeds about fifty years ago freeing millions of people from a life of drudgery. Today, non-organic farmers spray chemicals to kill weeds. What do organic growers do? (See **Marketing Myth #3** for the answer.)

For the last 150 years fruit and vegetable growers have been spraying pesticides to kill insects, bacteria and fungi. Not harmonious, but very beneficial to our fruit and vegetables. Before the spraying began, it was routine for farmers to lose 50-75% of their crops to destructive insects and fungi. Farmers decided to reduce their losses and began waging war on these destructive organisms. One of the major catalysts for change was the Irish Potato Famine in the 1840s when several million people died because all their

potatoes were destroyed by a fungus. This was not a harmonious time-the crops had no defense against the marauding pests. The first pesticides were toxic sprays of copper, lime, and sulfur-sprayed in massive doses to kill the insects and fungi. Non-organic growers have largely moved away from these older compounds and spray synthetic chemicals to kill fungi and insects. What do organic growers do? (See **Marketing Myth #2** for the answer)

Marketing Myth #2: Organic growers do not use toxic pesticides on their crops.

The truth is that organic growers use toxic pesticides. Organic fruit growers spray the same antibiotics to kill bacteria that non-organic growers spray. Organic growers spray toxic microbial insecticides that destroy the guts of insects. Organic fruit and vegetable growers spray copper, sulfur and lime to kill fungi that would destroy their crops. Organic growers have returned to the ways of the past. These toxic sprays are allowed because they are not synthetic chemicals – a fine distinction that most of the audience won't get, so why should *Store Wars* mention it? One of the characters in the film says that people don't want to know where their food comes from. Is that why the film conveniently avoids the subject of the massive sprays of pesticides by organic growers? Organic growers usually spray their fruit and vegetables many more times than do non-organic growers because the older pesticides are less effective and have to be sprayed more frequently to do an adequate job of killing the unwanted pests. Hey, Obi, how about a picture of an organic grower spraying a pesticide? After all, such a photo would help the audience understand where their organic food comes from.

Marketing Myth #3: Organic production is sustainable for the future.

The truth is that the future for organic production in the United States is dim. One of the main reasons that organic production will not be a major force in U.S. agriculture (it accounts for less than 1% of crop acreage) is the reliance of organic growers on laborers to pull weeds by hand. Since they have to kill weeds and since they cannot use chemicals to do so, organic growers have reverted to the ways of the past and employ people in the drudgery of pulling weeds by hand. In the U.S., these workers cost about \$10 per hour while in Mexico and Latin America, the task can be performed for 10 cents an hour. Organic production is not sustainable in the U.S. because of the massive amount of labor that is required and its high cost in the U.S. Domestic organic crop production's growth pales in comparison to the rapid adoption of other recent agricultural innovations. Organic acres in the U.S. grew from 400,000 in the early 1990s to 1.3 million in the last few years while domestic crop acreage planted with genetically-engineered seeds grew from zero to 80 million in the same time period. Chemicals to kill weeds have been used for 50 years and pesticides to kill insects and fungi have been used for 150 years. Chemical-intensive pest control is sustainable for the foreseeable future. The chemical pesticides are extremely effective and low in cost in comparison to non chemical alternatives.

Inexpensive effective chemical pesticides make it possible for U.S. growers to provide every grocery store in America with inexpensive fresh fruit and vegetables every day of the year. Organic growers want to increase their share of the grocery store shelves. Their marketing strategy is inexcusable — they are suggesting that there is some cause for consumers to fear the non-organic foods. And yet, there is no evidence to indicate that anyone has ever had any adverse health problems of any nature from eating foods from fields treated with pesticides. Trust the data.