



# WORDS TO **EAT** BY

*A Glossary of Terms  
Used at Farmers  
Markets and Beyond*



Purchasing food shouldn't be complicated, but with so many different certifications, evolving agricultural terminology, and marketing jargon, it can be easy to get confused. This glossary will help you understand many commonly used terms at farmers markets and beyond.

**F**RESHFARM markets are **producer-only**, which means everything sold is grown or made by the people selling at the market. Some farmers and producers use the terms found in this guide, but others do not. The best way to learn more is to ask questions and build relationships with market farmers and producers. When you get groceries at the farmers markets directly from the people who grow and make your food, you can ask them about their farming, harvesting, and production practices and learn what steps they take to keep your food wholesome, safe, and delicious—something you can't do when you shop at the supermarket!

The farmers and producers in our network are all from the **Mid-Atlantic region**. The exact states included in the region depend on who you ask. At FRESHFARM, we consider the Mid-Atlantic region to include Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

We hope this guide helps you make informed food choices that align with your values, connects you with the people who grow and make your food, and deepens your understanding of our regional food system.



# FARMING TERMS

## **Biodynamic Farming**

Biodynamic farming shares similarities with organic farming tactics, such as crop rotation and composting. However, it is differentiated by using special plant, animal, and mineral preparations and the rhythmic influences of the sun, moon, planets, and stars to create a thriving agrarian ecosystem.

## **Certified Naturally Grown**

This is a grassroots alternative to the USDA's National Organic Program with approximate alignment to national organic standards. Certified Naturally Grown farms manage soil and water responsibly and do not use synthetic chemicals or genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Certified Naturally Grown is a non-governmental organization that relies on peer reviews, rather than third-party organizations, to inspect its farms. The program is meant for small farmers, requires less paperwork, and has lower certification fees for farmers compared to the USDA's National Organic Program.



## **Conventional Farming**

This term refers to standard agricultural practices widespread in the industry. These practices include using pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, monocropping, antibiotics, and hormones. Conventional farming in the U.S. may also include using GMOs.

## **Dry-Farmed/Dry Farming**

A technique that seeks to retain soil moisture and minimize or eliminate irrigation.

## **Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)**

This term describes plants, animals, or microorganisms whose genetic makeup has been modified by adding or deleting DNA through genetic engineering or transgenic technology. Common modifications include adding herbicide resistance, insect resistance, disease resistance, non-browning, or increasing nutrients. In general, genes are taken (copied) from one organism that shows a desired trait and transferred into the genetic code of another organism. Genetic modification is currently allowed in conventional farming.

## **Heirloom**

Heirloom crop varieties (also called farmers' varieties or traditional varieties) have been developed by farmers through years of cultivation, selection, and seed saving and then passed down through generations. Heirloom crops are generally regarded as having existed for 50 years at a minimum.



## **High Tunnel/Low Tunnel**

Also known as a hoop house, grow tunnel, or hot house, a high tunnel is a protective structure to extend the growing season. A high tunnel is made from a frame and plastic sheeting and may resemble a greenhouse structure, but it is unheated and has no electricity or gas utilities connected. A low tunnel serves a similar purpose but is only two to three feet tall. Tunnel interiors heat up from incoming solar radiation, which warms plants and soil faster than heat can escape the structure. Tunnels can provide extra weeks or months of growing season.

## **Integrated Pest Management (IPM)**

A management strategy to control harmful pests (insects, animals, etc.) on farms that prioritizes remedies with the fewest harmful environmental effects. The emphasis is on pest control, not eradication. Tactics include insect traps, insect pheromones to disrupt mating, sanitation techniques, and introducing beneficial insects to control harmful pest populations. Pesticides are applied sparingly and are used as a last resort when other controls are inadequate.

## **Locally Grown**

Food and other agricultural products produced, processed, and sold within a particular region, whether defined by distance, state border, or regional boundaries, are considered locally grown. Because the term is not nationally regulated, individual farmers markets can define and regulate it based on their mission and circumstances. At FRESHFARM, we require that our farmers and producers grow or make their food within a 200-mile radius of the market they sell at.

## **Monocropping**

Also known as continuous cropping, monocropping is the practice of growing a single crop year after year on the same land, usually commodity crops. Monocropping can minimize costs and streamline production, but can also cause soil depletions and a reduction in biodiversity.

## **Naturally Grown/All Natural**

These terms are often used for meat and are largely unregulated. USDA guidelines state that natural meat and poultry products can only undergo minimal processing and cannot contain artificial colors, artificial flavors, preservatives, or other artificial ingredients.

## **No Spray/Pesticide-Free**

Some farmers avoid using pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides. "No spray" or "pesticide-free" indicates that the farmer has not applied these substances to their crops. These claims are not third-party verified.

## **No-Till Farming**

A method for growing crops without disturbing the soil through tillage (shoveling, hoeing, plowing, etc.). Benefits include reducing soil erosion, protecting soil structure, and improving soil health.

## **Regenerative Agriculture**

A relatively new concept encompassing a broad set of principles that aim to restore farmland and reverse the harmful effects of climate change through composting, cover cropping, rotational farming, and no-till methods.

### **Sustainable Agriculture**

This is broadly classified as socially just, humane, economically viable, and environmentally sound farming. The term is unregulated and interpretations can vary.

### **Transitional**

Transitional is an unregulated term that refers to a farm using organic practices while transitioning towards organic certification. Farmers must practice organic methods for at least three years on any land before the products harvested from that land can be sold or labeled as USDA Certified Organic.

### **USDA Certified Organic**

This label indicates that a food or agricultural product has been produced according to the USDA organic standards. These standards require producers to cycle resources, conserve biodiversity, and preserve ecological balance. The USDA organic label is the only government-backed marketing claim for organic food sold in the U.S. Only foods produced according to the USDA organic standards can display the organic seal. Some farmers indicate that they use organic methods or that their food is organically grown, but without certification, they can not use the organic label or claim their food is organic.



### **Vine-Ripened/Tree-Ripened**

These terms describe fruit picked from the vine or tree when ripe. Many fruits shipped long distances are picked unripe and then treated with ethylene gas to hasten ripening and soften them.



## **ANIMAL HUSBANDRY TERMS**

### **Closed Herd**

This term means bison, cattle, goats, or sheep were all bred from the same original herd, and no animals purchased from breeders or other sources were incorporated into the herd. In closed herd systems, farmers and ranchers can preserve and enhance certain genetic qualities and minimize the introduction of possible pathogens from other animals.

### **Free-Range/Free-Roaming/Cage-Free**

Free-range and related terms imply that meat or poultry products are from animals raised in the open air with the freedom to roam. This term has no standard definition and is unregulated in the beef industry. The USDA regulates these terms for poultry and egg products, requiring that birds have access to the outdoors for an undetermined period each day.

### **Grass-Fed**

Bison, cattle, goat, and sheep diets are grass-fed when they consist of freshly grazed pasture during the growing season and stored grasses (hay or grass silage) during winter or drought. Related terms include grass-based, grass-finished, pasture-raised, pasture-based, and pastured-finished.



### **Heritage Breed**

Breeds of livestock and poultry bred over time to be well-adapted to local environmental conditions, withstand disease, and survive in harsh environmental conditions. Heritage breeds generally have slow growth rates and long, productive lives outdoors, making them well-suited for grazing and pasturing.

### **Humane**

If an animal product is labeled humane, it implies that the animals were treated compassionately from birth to slaughter. This can mean that animals were allowed to engage in their natural behaviors, were raised with sufficient space to lie down, had access to shelter, experienced gentle handling to limit stress, and were given ample fresh water and a healthy diet without added antibiotics or hormones. Some third-party certifications address humane animal husbandry but are used almost exclusively by large ranching operations.

### **No Antibiotics/Antibiotic-Free**

These terms mean that antibiotics are not administered to animals during their lifecycle. Some farms administer antibiotics to chickens, cattle, hogs, and sheep to boost growth rates and prevent widespread disease caused by crowded conditions. If a farmer advertises their products as antibiotic-free, this may suggest a high animal husbandry standard.

### **No Hormones/Hormone-Free**

Hormones are commonly used in commercial farming of animals like cattle to increase their size and milk production. Some of these hormones are natural, some are synthetic, and some are genetically engineered. A majority of U.S. cattle raised for beef receive growth hormones at some time during their life. If a farmer says their meat products contain no hormones, they do not engage in this practice.



# FOOD PROCESSING TERMS



## Artisan/Artisanal

Suggests that products are made by hand in small batches. Ingredients can come from any source and are not necessarily connected with a particular farm or producer.

## Dry-Aged

Dry-aged meat is hung in a temperature- and humidity-controlled room for weeks to develop flavor and tenderness. In these settings, the muscle fibers relax, yielding a less resilient, more tender meat. Most commercially available meat is wet-aged, meaning it is wrapped in plastic and then refrigerated for a much shorter period.

## Farmstead Cheese

A farmstead cheese is made by the same people who farm the animals that produce the milk. In other words, it is “from the farm.”

## Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)

A collection of voluntary but recommended practices from the USDA intended to reduce the risk of harm to agricultural workers, the environment, and customers. Farms undergo voluntary audits that verify that fruits and vegetables are produced, packed, handled, and stored to minimize risks of microbial food safety hazards.

## Naturally Leavened

A naturally leavened bread or baked good does not use commercial yeast. Instead, it is leavened using a sourdough starter made from natural yeasts. The dough goes through a sour fermentation that is slower and less predictable than commercial yeast leavening. Most breads in supermarkets and grocery stores use commercial yeast as the leavening agent.

## Raw Food

Raw foods include milk, cheese, cider, kombucha, vinegar, and sauerkraut that are not pasteurized (heated) to a minimum of 145° F. In the U.S., raw milk cheeses must be aged for 60 days. In many states, including Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia, selling raw milk for human consumption is prohibited.

## Unulfured/No Sulfur

Many dried fruits are sulfured with sulfur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) to prevent oxidation during and after drying. This preserves their original color and acts as a preservative. Unulfured fruits are often a darker brown.



**F**RESHFARM is a Washington, DC-based nonprofit that builds a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient food system in the Mid-Atlantic region by producing innovative solutions in partnership with local communities and organizations. We create food access, economic development, and thriving communities through hands-on education, farmers markets, and food distribution programs.

[freshfarm.org](http://freshfarm.org) | [hello@freshfarm.org](mailto:hello@freshfarm.org) | [@freshfarmdc](https://www.instagram.com/freshfarmdc)

