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Eco Wise

## High-Fructose Corn Syrup: Not So Sweet for the Planet

Sunday, March 9, 2008; Page N02

Much ink has been devoted to the dietary hazards of high-fructose corn syrup, the cheap, ubiquitous sweetener found not just in soda and [Twinkies](#) but in many foods that aren't even considered sweets, such as bread and ketchup. Though the jury's still out on whether the substance is to blame for rising obesity rates, environmentalists have been trumpeting another reason to avoid it: Doing so is a step toward going green.

High-fructose corn syrup "may be cheap in the supermarket, but in the environment it could not be more expensive," [Michael Pollan](#), author of "In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto" ([Penguin Press](#), 2008), writes in an e-mail.

Most corn is grown as a monoculture, meaning that the land is used solely for corn, not rotated among crops. This maximizes yields, but at a price: It depletes soil nutrients, requiring more pesticides and fertilizer while weakening topsoil.

"The environmental footprint of HFCS is deep and wide," writes Pollan, a prominent critic of industrial agriculture. "Look no farther than the dead zone in the Gulf [of [Mexico](#)], an area the size of [New Jersey](#) where virtually nothing will live because it has been starved of oxygen by the fertilizer runoff coming down the [Mississippi](#) from the Corn Belt. Then there is the atrazine in the water in farm country -- a nasty herbicide that, at concentrations as little as 0.1 part per billion, has been shown to turn male frogs into hermaphrodites."

Milling and chemically altering corn to form high-fructose corn syrup also is energy-intensive. That's not to say that corn is evil and other foods aren't; all crops require energy to grow and transport. What makes corn a target is that federal subsidies -- and tariffs on imported sugar -- keep prices low, paving the way for widespread use of high-fructose corn syrup and, in the process, keeping the American palate accustomed to the sweetness it provides.

Corn is a useful crop with high yields, although it uses more fertilizers and insecticides and causes more soil erosion than other crops, according to David Pimentel, a professor in Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "Organic corn is not a large part of the industry, but it should be," he says. Pimentel published a study in 2005 demonstrating that, over 22 years, growing corn organically produced the same



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How, then, to satisfy a sweet tooth without bitter repercussions for the planet? You might not buy corn syrup at the grocery store, but you can scale back your consumption of processed foods that contain it. As for tabletop sweeteners, the most Earth-friendly options are locally produced organic honey and real maple syrup from the northeastern United States. Agave nectar is extracted from cacti that grow in the Mexican desert -- not exactly local, but at least it's on this continent -- and it's also popular because of its low glycemic index. (Ironically, many agave farmers have begun torching their crops in response to the ethanol industry's demand for corn.)

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Sugar comes in many forms and grows mostly in tropical climates, requiring transportation; the best bet is to go organic and steer clear of the white stuff. Evaporated cane juice is a less refined form of sugar that has made its way into alternative soft drinks.

The bottom line: The more fuel, energy and chemicals that go into processing a food, the less nutritious that food probably is. So steering clear of high-fructose corn syrup can't be bad for your health -- or the planet.

-- [Eviana Hartman](#)

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