The next time you visit the grocery store, take a few minutes to notice how many items are labeled organic. You won’t have to look very hard. What once was considered a niche market has now become mainstream. Often, you’ll find entire sections of grocery stores now set aside for organic products. In fact, there are even grocery store chains devoted to selling organic and natural foods. So, with an ever-growing market for organics, it seems only natural that the Institute of Agriculture will help fill the need for future organic producers.

Starting this fall, the Department of Plant Sciences will offer an undergraduate organic production concentration. Students will be able to integrate plant sciences with soil science, agricultural economics, entomology, ecology and plant pathology to attain the knowledge and skills to manage organic cropping systems.

“Student interest in organic crop production was the key driver in the creation of this concentration,” says Dr. David Butler, assistant professor of organic, sustainable and alternative crop production. “At the same time students trained in organic production are needed to help continue the successes occurring on the state level, where we have seen a steady increase in the number of certified organic growers and processors.”

Students enrolled in the concentration will have the opportunity to gain practical knowledge at the nearby Organic Crops Unit. The unit covers 90 acres and takes classroom instruction beyond the traditional four walls, giving students valuable hands-on experience. “This concentration is enhanced by the close proximity of the UT East Tennessee AgResearch and Education Center’s Organic Crops Unit, which allows students to gain hands-on experience in field laboratory activities as a part of their course work,” says Butler. “There is also the potential to work on the farm through internships or as student employees in faculty research programs,” he notes.

The Organic Production Concentration is for men and women who are interested in managing or owning organic farms, international agricultural development efforts, consulting or working with agricultural organizations.

The organics industry is evolving rapidly and there is a growing need for well-trained professionals. Some of the careers include organic horticulturists and agronomists, orchardists, teachers, sales representatives, researchers, extension professionals and entrepreneurs. “With continued growth in sales of organic products, there are numerous career opportunities for students in this area of study,” says Butler. For those students who decide to go on to graduate studies, this concentration prepares them for advanced degrees in horticulture, agronomy or related fields.

Butler says one of the key concepts in the development of the concentration is agricultural sustainability. He encourages students to enhance their coursework with electives or a minor in fields relating to the economic, social and/or environmental aspects of agricultural sustainability.

So the next time you’re at the grocery store or your local farmers’ market, take a minute to check out the wide array of organic products available. In the not too distant future, you may be helping support a new entrepreneur and a recent graduate gain success in an ever-growing business.

Visit http://plantsciences.utk.edu/organic for more information and a detailed curriculum for this concentration. –Doug Edlund