

COURTESY OF VILLAGE FARMS



COURTESY OF INTERGROW GREENHOUSES

Greenhouses provide the ideal climate, which boosts yields and produces homegrown flavor consumers are looking for.

Seeing Green

Quality, consistency, food safety and green growing practices help advance hothouse category

Hothouse producers tout the year-round availability of high-quality tomatoes on the vine, bell peppers and cucumbers as the single most important reason for the category's continued growth.

"We can offer good-quality greenhouse vegetables 12 months a year. That is an important factor for the retailer," says Jim DiMenna, president of Jem-D International, Leamington, Ontario. "He can get the color he wants, the volume he wants, the flavor he wants 12 months a year. Not many items in the produce department can offer that."

DiMenna says greenhouse produce isn't subject to the elements, and weather doesn't impede harvest — making quality quite reliable.

For customers who shop the nine PCC Natural Market stores in metro Seattle, that availability is essential. Joe Hardiman is producer merchandiser for the chain, which sells mostly organic produce. He says customers want their warm-weather produce in the deep

winter and greenhouse-grown produce meets that demand.

"We have the opportunity to carry products into a longer season than Mother Nature allows. Customers want those items when they want them, and they want them organically. [With greenhouse] we can provide both," Hardiman says. "People love to know they can find a quality tomato, pepper or eggplant in the off-season when they wouldn't normally expect to find it."

The store sources greenhouse cluster tomatoes, red bell peppers and eggplant from Origin Organic Farms Inc., a greenhouse operation with 33 acres grown in a soil medium in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Year-round availability goes hand-in-hand with high quality.

"Perhaps the greatest strength of hothouse fruits and vegetables is quality — consistent quality," says Kevin Weaver, vice president of produce merchandising for Marsh Supermarkets LLC, Indianapolis. "Most customers buy with their eyes and make subsequent purchases based on flavor. Hothouse fruits and vegetables offer a striking appearance and a positive eating experience consistently."

And producers are constantly trying to improve quality as they seek new varieties. Chris Veillon, marketing manager for Mastronardi

Produce Ltd., Kingsville, Ontario, says the company does extensive research and development in search of the most flavorful varieties. The company's expansion into specialty products include the brown Kumato tomato, One Sweet tomato and mini sweet peppers.

While availability and quality are the top selling points for greenhouse products, other factors including food safety and environmentally friendly growing practices help the category maintain steady increases in demand.

Food safety concerns boost sales

In light of the last year's food safety scares associated with fresh, field-grown tomatoes, greenhouse producers say more consumers view hothouse produce as a safer option.

"Food safety is very important for our customers, and it has become more prevalent over the past couple of years, with the salmonella scare summer before last," says Helen Aquino, marketing manager for Village Farms, Eatontown, N.J. "Hydroponics are grown indoors and in a controlled environment, so they are less susceptible food safety issues such as salmonella."

She says the company proudly touts the 100 percent across-the-board rating it received during a full food safety audit in January.

"The issue of food safety cannot be overstated," Weaver says. "Hothouse vegetables certainly offer a level of control over the risk factors."

DiMenna says greenhouses also allow growers to use biological pest controls, thus reducing the use of insecticides and other chemicals. Veillon of Mastronardi says people have confidence in the greenhouse growing method, adding that everything is grown in a controlled environment using integrated pest management to eliminate the need for pesticides.

"Green" growing practices bolster interest

A quick scan of top headlines often reveals something that has gone "green," and the hothouse category is benefiting from this trend. DiMenna says growers are moving toward renewable energy sources to heat and operate greenhouses more cleanly and efficiently.

Intergrow Greenhouses in Albion, N.Y., has implemented more energy-efficient equipment, along with biomass boilers and energy curtains, says Dirk Biemans, president. The company also recycles all its water and collects rain water for irrigation.

"We like to think we are pretty sustainable," he says.

The company, which opened in 1998, has one 15-acre greenhouse and one 30-acre greenhouse growing mainly cluster tomatoes on the vine. Biemans says Intergrow expects to produce about 1.5 million cases this year.

Aquino of Village Farms says environmental friendliness is key to greenhouse production.

"We are growing in an intensified system using less land, less water, and there is no topsoil loss or degradation of soil nutrients," she says. "We can grow 20 to 30 times more food per acre [than field producers]."

The green factor is such a persuasive one when it comes to retail sales that the company debuted a new marketing plan at the Produce Marketing Association's Fresh Summit in October, called the 'Barefoot Plan', to explain its growing methods and build awareness of environmentally friendly agriculture all the way from the farmer to the consumer, she says.

Mastronardi Produce's Sunset brand One Sweet tomatoes offer burst of flavor in a small bite.

Pricing, promotions still necessary

With the nation's economy still struggling, higher-priced organic items often can be left off a consumer's grocery list. But hothouse vegetable producers say retailers can keep the category up by selling in multiples.

DiMenna says he has seen success with three for \$5, 10 for \$10 or two for \$2 promotions.

"Kroger is big on 10 for \$10, and in Ontario they like three for \$5 deals," he says, adding that this type of pricing also leads the consumer to buy a packaged greenhouse vegetable that they might not normally pick up.

Veillon agrees that multiple pricing has been a trend, citing the popularity of two for \$4 deals when new products are introduced. He also says that many retailers do in-store demos to help educate the consumer on the high quality of greenhouse produce.

Biemans says retailers he works with have been known to sell cluster tomatoes for 99 cents a pound during peak production. He says no matter what the price, it's important to sell them bulk, in large displays where consumers can see the vines and smell the freshness.

Retailers also are wise to play the "locally grown" card when their hothouse producers are close to home. Biemans says retailers in the Northeast come to Intergrow for produce they can promote as local rather than ship product in from the West Coast.

Across the country in Seattle, PCC Natural Markets considers its supplier local because it is only a couple hundred miles away and still in the Pacific Northwest.

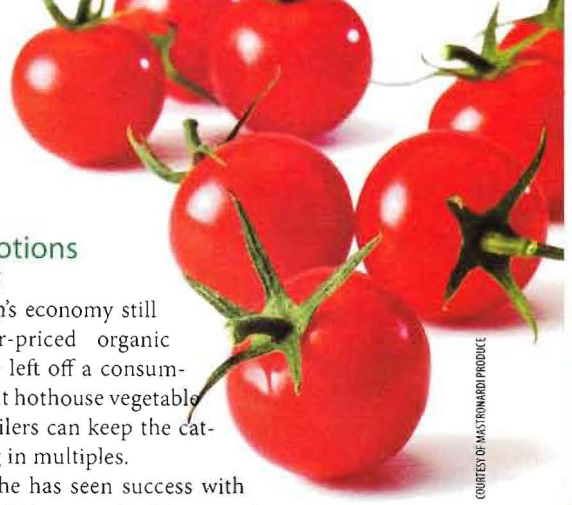
"We feature it as a local greenhouse," Har-diman says. "It is the word 'local' more than 'greenhouse' that brings the power of the sale."

Another method for selling hothouse produce is pairing it with other items to give consumers a convenient meal idea. Aquino recommends retailers build a display showcasing tomatoes on the vine with balsamic vinegar, fresh mozzarella and fresh basil for a quick way to make a Caprese salad.

Marsh stores prefers to compare tomatoes to tomatoes, Weaver says. The company doesn't merchandise all hothouse items together. Rather, it integrates the hothouse varieties with field-grown varieties where they fit in the department.

"We concentrate on building displays that give the customer a total purchase opportunity," Weaver says. "For example, we might include beefsteak tomatoes with iceberg lettuce and bacon; sweet peppers might be included with fresh salad greens; and fresh herbs might be placed near the seafood department. The possibilities are endless—both inside and outside of the produce department." ♦

For links visit: www.ProduceMerchandising.com



COURTESY OF MASTRONARDI PRODUCE



COURTESY OF VILLAGE FARMS

Companies like Village Farms are working to increase consumer awareness of the sustainability and environmental practices they employ at their operations. Village Farms unveiled its 'Barefoot Plan' in October to do just that.