

Talking shop with...

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The senior vice president of sales, marketing and fulfillment for Eatontown, N.J.-based Village Farms says that hydroponic products offer safe and fresh alternatives to consumers in the produce department.

From a retailer's viewpoint, why is hydroponic produce important?

Douglas Kling: The consumer is any retailer's most valuable asset. The consumer generates the equity that builds the chain's gross revenues, brand image and reputation. Given that hydroponic products offer the retailer a safer, eco-friendly, high-quality product at a reasonable price that meets and exceeds consumer expectations. Today's consumers want healthy products that are environmentally friendly and safe. In addition, retailers limit their liability by using safer hydroponic products, particularly in light of the recent salmonella scare related to peppers and the peanut butter recall.

So how should hydroponic produce be merchandised?

They should be merchandised out front in the produce department and promoted as fresh, natural products that are good for the environment, safer than field-grown alternatives and offer the same nutritional benefits. They can also be bundled with other products. With the summer coming up, retailers may want to feature hydroponic tomatoes with various cheeses, onions and salad offerings, along with recipe cards. This type of promotional merchandising will encourage additional purchases and send a good-for-you message to the retailers' most valuable asset—the end consumer.

For example, the lycopene in tomatoes can be a cancer preventative and is good for the heart. This information can be highlighted on point-of-sale tags, in recipes featured in retailer inserts and magazines, or on TVs at the register where available.

Of course, retailers want to know about pricing, especially compared to traditional produce.

Like any other produce, hydroponics can be offered at prices similar to traditional produce. New growing techniques, and advanced technology allow retailers the ability to sell and feature hydroponic products at a reasonable price and promote hydroponics during the key selling seasons of spring and summer.

How is hydroponic produce more environmentally friendly?

Hydroponic products use 87% less water than field-grown produce. Hydroponic tomatoes are not grown in soil and therefore there is no soil erosion. In addition, hydroponic growing use integrated pest management to control pests in the greenhouse, so good bugs eat the bad bugs versus the extensive use of chemicals. A hydroponic greenhouse will yield 30 times the product per acre versus produce grown in the field.

Can you outline the company's commitment to food safety?

Village Farms is and has always been committed to the highest standards of safety. In fact, we have the highest Primus ratings of any company in hydroponic growing. Most recently, our facilities in Texas were rated at 100% which is a record for the

Produce grown using hydroponic methods offers consistent quality and requires less water, among other key attributes.

industry. At Village Farms we met Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) standard before they became industry standards.

Village Farms is a leader in agricultural research and development of greenhouse production technology. Can you share some of the upcoming innovations in this area?

With our Greenhouse Advanced Technology Expert System (GATES), we broke world records this year by producing more than 102 kilograms of tomatoes per square meter. The average greenhouse produces 70 to 80 kilograms per square meter. This technology is proprietary to Village Farms and will create new efficiencies and higher yields in growing, making hydroponics, over time, more environmental friendly, with consistent quality, high nutritional attributes and safer than field crops. □