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A House Divided

Some say highlighting greenhouse can bring in the green but others prefer to let consumers decide for themselves

By David Mitchell

Growing produce in greenhouses provides an ideal climate and a protected environment, offers some environmental advantages and allows retailers to keep a commodity on the shelf beyond the scope of the field-grown season.

But ask industry sources how to communicate these facts to consumers—or whether to bother—and you'll hear a diverse selection of advice.



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Point of sale

Matt Mastronardi, vice president of sales for Pure Hothouse Foods Inc., Leamington, Ontario, says offering recipes and nutritional information helps, but scale is a vital factor.

"You're going to see more educational material at the point of purchase," he says. "You need to reach out to the consumer. Consumers like to understand what they're buying and how they can use it. A brochure is a little much. How much space do you have in front of the vegetables being displayed? It has to be a concept built into the package the consumer is already buying. If it's already in the package, it's more convenient for the retailers and the consumer."



FILE PHOTO

Greenhouse produce, like this at Hen House in Kansas City, can be a great way to feature local produce even in the off-season doldrums.

Mastronardi says that precious retail space doesn't allow for something as complicated as explaining the difference between greenhouse product and its field-grown counterparts. Pure Hothouse instead prints its Web site address on its labels, directing consumers to information online.

Produce manager Dean Schladweiler says the Wedge Community Coop, Minneapolis, also uses the Web, linking to growers' sites from its own site.

The Wedge also places profiles throughout the produce department for every grower it sources from directly.

The Vancouver, British Columbia-based Oppenheimer Group offers retailers point-of-sale materials and prints information on its bags and clamshells, drawing attention to the fact that greenhouse product is grown in that controlled, protected environment, says Aaron Quon, Oppenheimer's category director for greenhouse.

Despite consumer concerns about food safety, Dave Corsi, vice president of produce and floral operations for Wegman's Food Markets Inc., Rochester, N.Y., says touting greenhouse rather than field-grown product could be a mistake for retailers.

"We have not seen a lift in movement on items based on the growing method and assumptions of safer products," Corsi says. "Personally, I believe the messaging would be controversial and confusing if we promote items that are safer than others (based on) the growing method."

Together or apart?

While some greenhouse growers would like to see greenhouse products displayed together, other sources suggest that commodities should stick together.

Chris Veillon, marketing manager for Mastronardi Produce Ltd., Kingsville, Ontario, says all tomato products should be kept together, including organics.

"The tomato display needs to be a destination and a focal point of any produce department," he says.

Corsi agreed that commodities should be grouped and easy to find.

"To accommodate our customers and be respectful of their time, we merchandise by category," he says. "We don't want to slow them down searching for products scattered throughout the department. That is why we merchandise by classification regardless of the growing method."

Cross merchandising

While sources disagree about the aforementioned topics, there is widespread support of cross promotions.

"The more meal solutions we can offer consumers that they can duplicate at home the better," says Mark Cassius, vice president of sales for Eurofresh Inc., Willcox Ariz.

Mastronardi says Pure Hothouse's retail partners have successfully combined baby cucumbers and tomatoes with dips, while a summer barbecue promotion combined bell peppers with spices.

"It's a smart thing to do," he says. "You're driving sales of another item in the store, so it's win-win for the retailer."

Quon says combining vegetables and bagged salads shows shoppers how easily "a salad can become a meal."

Locally grown

Local has become a buzzword in the industry in recent years, though many associate it with seasonal promotions rather than a nearly year-round product like greenhouse vegetables and tomatoes.

"We're seeing greenhouse product becoming a bigger piece of retailers supporting locally grown product," says Quon, who adds that retailers have promoted local greenhouse product from Oppenheimer's growers in British Columbia, Oregon, Washington, and California.

Likewise, Cassius says Eurofresh has been successful working with Arizona retailers to promote its tomatoes.

Veillon says Mastronardi has promoted greenhouse items as locally grown, especially in Ontario, where a number of retailers have jumped on the opportunity to showcase produce grown virtually in their own back yard.

Nino Salvaggio International Marketplace, St. Clair Shores, Mich., is about 90 minutes from Ontario greenhouses, but produce buyer Joe Santoro says the small independent chain doesn't promote the greenhouse items it carries as local because they're imported.



COURTESY OF THE OPPENHEIMER GROUP

A display like this from The Oppenheimer Group makes for a great educational piece for consumers about greenhouse-grown produce.

Displays

Santoro says all his greenhouse product is sold in bulk, and he doesn't use POS material because the items typically don't need any help getting out the door.

"Anything that comes out of a greenhouse is usually second to none as far as appearances," he says. "We never have any issues with it. When it's good—and 95% of the time it is—it sells itself, especially with the bigger sizes. Colored peppers with the stems on them look like Christmas ornaments they're so perfect. You can have a lot of fun with the bell pepper displays when you have all three colors."

Quon says retailers can plan big displays from June through August when greenhouse volume is high and supplies are not likely to run short. He says Oppenheimer encourages retailers to run themed advertisements with greenhouse products combined in one ad.

"We're trying to get retailers to build big, colorful displays with some excitement," he says.

Cassius suggests promoting some type of tomato weekly and advised retailers not to be afraid to introduce new specialty products.

Veillon adds that when it comes to the specialty tomatoes, it's important to provide sampling or demonstrations.

POINTS OF DIFFERENTIATION

For years, many retailers have devoted a defined area of their produce departments to organics, complete with signs to differentiate those products from their conventional counterparts.

Now some greenhouse growers hope to convince their retail customers to give a similar distinction to hydroponics.

Doug Kling, senior vice president and chief sales and marketing officer for Eatontown, N.J.-based Village Farms LP, says displaying organic product in a centralized area gives it "mystique."

"Hydroponic greenhouse product should have mystique, too," he says. "There's an opportunity at retail to differentiate hydroponically grown greenhouse product. There are key selling points retailers can take advantage of."

Those selling points, Kling says, include land preservation, water conservation and food safety. Hydroponic produce is grown using mineral nutrient solutions in water without soil. Kling says the process involves less water and soil erosion than other growing methods, and the integrated pest-management systems employed involve limited pesticide use.

Kling says he is confident that displays devoted to hydroponics will start appearing in both independent retail stores and chain stores within the next six to 12 months, and he's not alone.

Mark Cassius, vice president of sales for Willcox, Ariz.-based Eurofresh Inc., says he would like to see stores devote a 15-foot area—or bigger—to hydroponics.

"If you take a category view, greenhouse tomatoes represent over 52% of the tomato category sales and are still growing," he says. "The greenhouse products are probably under-allocated and under-merchandised on the shelf."

That's not always the case, however.

"There are many progressive retailers, both on a national level and regional level, whose greenhouse tomato sales are between 60% to 70% of the category," Cassius says. "And I believe that there is more room for growth."