

fresh fare

Health Trends Toward Homegrown Edibles

CURRENT RESEARCH SHOWS THAT HOME VEGETABLE GARDENING REMAINS A POSITIVE FORCE IN THE INDUSTRY.

By Scott Mozingo



In 2010, nearly half of home gardeners in the United States expressed interest in starting a vegetable garden. That year was the pinnacle of the recent homegrown trend, and it was fueled by a perfect storm of economic, social and environmental factors. Growers were quick to respond to the demand with an increase in their vegetable crop production. At the same time, national plant brands joined the industry, and edibles became a bright horizon.

Now, two years later, consumer interest in vegetables has decreased slightly to 38 percent, according to this year's "Garden Trends Report" by the Garden Writers Association Foundation. But new consumer trends are helping to sustain vegetable programs. The rising interest in health and wellness is positioned to feed gardeners' bodies with nutrition — and your greenhouse with further opportunity.

In this article we'll look at some health trends that show how homegrown fruits, herbs and vegetables remain an important part of consumers' lives. I'll also provide tips for a successful vegetable program as you continue to reach this market.

Why Health Matters

Ball Horticultural Co. recently completed research on the motivations behind gardening, and how consumers make garden purchasing decisions. The research also uncovered the main drivers for why gardeners start a vegetable garden. While most began because "homegrown produce tastes better than what can be bought at the store"

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*Top right: BOOST 'Gold Standard' cucumber
Bottom right: BOOST 'Sweet Heat' pepper*

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(45 percent), other gardeners started veggie gardening because they believed them to be “more nutritious” (10 percent) and that they felt “more secure” knowing they’ve grown them themselves (10 percent).

Today’s consumer is on-the-go and not always making healthy diet choices. But as we lead more sedentary lives, we’ve created a rising concern for health, obesity and nutrition. In addition, mounting healthcare costs have forced many consumers to take proactive steps towards wellness (the best defense is a good offense). Many consumers are seeking natural, wholesome foods to keep them in top condition. Even initiatives from the White House are encouraging healthy food choices, and the White House garden sets an example for younger generations by growing fresh, homegrown food.

More evidence of health trends can be seen on grocery store shelves, with food choices and packaging touting high-nutrition, especially those rich in antioxidants. Antioxidants are vitamins and nutrients that help protect a body’s cells from damage. Damaged cells can be the root cause of many chronic diseases, cancers and even arthritis. A diet that contains antioxidants plays a role in strengthening the immune system, and is believed to improve anti-aging compounds.

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Experts and dieticians say the best source for antioxidants is eating fresh fruits and vegetables that are high in vitamins A, C and E, beta-carotene, selenium and lycopene. The good news is these are all included in home gardening favorites like cucumbers, lettuce and spinach greens, peppers, tomatoes and more.

At the grocery store, food producers responded to the demand for antioxidant-rich foods with great success. Now growers can capitalize on high-nutrition choices through their edibles program. Special plant collections, such as the recently introduced Boost collection from Burpee Home Gardens, gives your retail customers a chance to offer an extra-healthy immunity boost in the

garden. The Boost plants were specially selected for their higher nutritive value:

Beta-carotene is an antioxidant found in colorful fruits and vegetables, especially those with red, orange and yellow hues. It can be converted to vitamin A, which is essential for bone development and proper vision.

Vitamin C, also known as ascorbic acid, is needed to form collagen in bones, cartilage, muscle and blood. It also helps the body absorb iron. Besides citrus fruits, this antioxidant is also found in peppers and other vegetables.

Lycopene is often found in red-colored vegetables. This carotenoid is present in your skin, liver, adrenal glands and lungs. With other nutrients, numerous studies show lycopene reduces incidence of cancer, cardiovascular disease and macular degeneration in the eye. Burpee is introducing two new high-lycopene tomatoes to Boost for 2013: 'Tasti-Lee' and 'Mighty Sweet'.

Further wellness trends specifically point to growing fresh small-fruit varieties, such as blueberries (now dubbed a "superfood"), as well as a renewed interest in home juicing and medicinal herbs. Watch for community/children's gardens and urban farming to continue to gain momentum. They also serve to educate consumers (and the next generation) on where their food comes from with a focus on organic, healthy growing methods.

You've read the trends; now let's take your edibles program to the next level of success.

5 Tips For a Successful Edibles Program

1. A successful vegetable program needs to be planned carefully so you always have the freshest looking products on the shelf. Gardeners (new and existing) want to see nice green plants that aren't looking overgrown or stretched. Plan your veggie transplanting schedule to accommodate this, and you'll see faster sales. Sowings bi-weekly are ideal, if possible.

2. Variety is key in vegetables because consumers are "hybrid loyal." In flowers, you can sometimes steer the customer toward an

ivory if you don't have white, but if you don't have 'Big Mama' tomato or 'Jalapeno Gigante' when she's looking for it, you might not get the sale. Keep notes on varieties your customers ask for

that you don't have, and be sure to include them in the next delivery so you're known as the destination for in-demand vegetables.

3. Seasonality is important. Everyone knows



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that cole crops need to be planted in the early spring, but we often forget to grow for the fall. There are opportunities for late-season sales for vegetable gardeners who want to transplant their


cool season crops and get one more harvest. This year's season was probably forgotten after the mad rush of spring, but as the trend for home gardening is sustained (and more consumer media

are talking about it), many gardeners are looking in the autumn. Don't forget to cross merchandise lettuce, spinach or other short-season seeds.

4. Consider suggestive selling herbs with your veggies in ways to let the consumer know how to use them. Herbs intimidate many new gardeners, having not cooked with them fresh before. Herb combination pots work well, but have your retail customer think about putting basil in with their tomato display, or mint near cucumbers and watermelon. Encourage the use of signage to tell shoppers how to use them.

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5. Resist the temptation to save a penny if it's not beneficial to the home gardener. If you think three melon seeds makes a better pot and plant in the garden, don't plant just one or two. Remember, if the garden consumer isn't successful, they won't be a repeat buyer. Grow the best product for her and she'll come back year after year.

Current research shows that home vegetable gardening remains a positive force in the industry. For instance, the Residential Landscape Architecture Trends survey reports that 81 percent of homeowners still find food/vegetable gardens (including orchards and vineyards) a popular topic of discussion. Maintain a healthy edibles program in your greenhouse and consumers will be willing to buy through the foreseeable future. 

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