



ROOT VEGGIES ADD VERSATILITY TO THE PRODUCE AISLE

Year-round marketing campaigns are a great way to promote root vegetables

By Kim O. Morgan as published in Produce Business

Root vegetables, so named because they grow underground with leafy greens above ground, absorb great amounts of nutrients from the soil, making them some of the healthiest vegetables in the produce section.

Consumers tend to think of potatoes, onions and sweet potatoes as root vegetables, but this produce category also includes carrots, beets, radishes, turnips, parsnips, ginger, garlic, yams, cassava, celery root, rutabaga, jicama and horseradish, all giving shoppers a large variety of healthy choices and flavors.

“The root vegetable market is one of the most unique groups of produce out there. You have unique spice with horseradish and parsnips; great color and flavor with carrots, beets, turnips and radishes; and you have great versatility with potatoes and sweet potatoes,” says Matt McMillin, leader of marketing and business development at J.R. Kelly Company

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“At Gumz Farms, we see great value in connecting the customer to the farm, highlighting where and how the produce is grown.”

– Alexandra Gumz

head of marketing, Gumz Farms LLC, Endeavor, Wisconsin

in Collinsville, Illinois.

J.R. Kelly Company is the largest supplier of horseradish roots in the United States. The fertile soil in Collinsville, 15 miles from downtown St. Louis, creates the ideal environment for production of horseradish, and thus McMillin proclaims it to be the “Horseradish Capital of the World.”

Regional preferences can indeed play a role in demand for specific root vegetables.

“In the Midwest, we see strong interest in hearty staples, like russet and red potatoes, as well as yellow

Top: Root vegetables absorb great amounts of nutrients from the soil, making them some of the healthiest vegetables in the produce section.

onions,” says Alexandra Gumz, head of marketing, Gumz Farms LLC, Endeavor, Wisconsin.

CULINARY TRADITIONS

“In southern regions, sweet potatoes tend to lead,” Gumz explains, “while coastal areas often see a demand for specialty and organic varieties. Tailoring assortment and messaging to align with local culinary traditions and demographics can help retailers better serve their customer base.”

Nichole Towell, senior director of marketing, Duda Farm Fresh Foods in Oviedo, Florida, agrees.

“When it comes to radishes, the West Coast typically sees higher demand for fresh bunches of radishes, as those consumers prefer to touch and see the produce,” Towell says. “But the East Coast prefers the Cello and Ready Radishes that are precut.”

“We even see regional differences with the demand for horseradish,” McMillin interjects.

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Above: Alexandra Gumz, head of marketing, Gumz Farms LLC, in Endeavor, Wisconsin, says the Midwest operation sees strong interest in hearty root vegetable staples like russet, yellow and red potatoes, and yellow onions, as opposed to southern regions where sweet potatoes tend to be most popular.

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Retailers should also be aware of cultural differences and preferences, since these can affect root vegetable sales.

For example, during Passover, the demand for horseradish often increases, while during holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, and during the winter, there is a high demand for potatoes, onions, carrots and sweet potatoes.

Highlighting the source of root vegetables is also important. Warmer growing regions and higher temperatures tend to produce radishes with a bolder, spicier taste, while cooler climates yield milder varieties.

FLAVOR TRENDS

“This means that flavor trends are closely tied to seasonal and regional conditions, and that’s a story worth telling,” Towell says. “By highlighting these natural differences, retailers can market root vegetables in a way that connects consumers to the growing region and the unique flavor profiles that come with it.”

Year-round marketing campaigns are a great way to push root vegetables, especially the least familiar of the produce category. Retailers can use comfort foods that are popular in fall and winter, such as stews and soups, to display root vegetables, along with roasts, broths and spices.

In summer, displaying root vegetables along with marinades, charcoal and grill tools can tap into warm-weather grilling. “Onions, in particular, pair naturally with a wide range of cooking ingredients, from fresh herbs and peppers to pasta sauces and proteins,” Gumz says.

Signage that advertises the healthy nutrients found in root vegetables can help customers incorporate them into their meals all year. Displays that



emphasize the many ways to use root vegetables can also push retail sales.

“I would love to see the health benefits mentioned a little bit more with this group of vegetables and have retailers positioning items that can be used together on shelves,” McMillin states.

Towell suggests emphasizing the versatility of root vegetables in ways that consumers may not have thought about.

“We suggest including radishes next

Above: Alexandra and Rod Gumz of Gumz Farms LLC pose in the field with freshly dug carrots.

to salad kits and offering recipe ideas, such as promoting radishes as a salad topper or as a low-carb dipper when placed next to dips and hummus,” she explains.

Jeffrey Cady, vice president of produce and floral, Northeast Shared Services, Buffalo, New York, says as the weather turns cooler in upstate New York, they ask

produce departments to display root vegetables.

MEAL IDEAS

"We also take root vegetables out of the produce department and tie them in with the meat department to give shoppers meal ideas," Cady notes.

Gumz says root vegetables are versatile, affordable and nutritious staples that fit into a wide range of diets and cooking styles.

"Emphasizing local sourcing and the simplicity of preparation also helps consumers feel more confident incorporating them into meals," she explains.

During pickling season, McMillin recommends retailers place horseradish near cucumbers so that shoppers don't have to search multiple sections to find different pickling ingredients.

Another area where horseradish can be used more often is in charcuterie. "Freshly shaved horseradish often has a bite to it that isn't overpowering, and it has a great, natural flavor that goes well with cheese, meats and crackers," McMillin says.

"Horseradish is also included in fire cider tonics, along with ginger, so placing these two items together is another idea for cross promotion," he relates.

Gumz says displays should be clean and well-stocked and incorporate recipes, QR codes with cooking ideas, or signage showcasing the local farm source. "This adds authenticity and helps to build trust," she stresses.

While most root vegetables appear hardy and durable, careful handling is important to maintain freshness and appearance.

TEMPERATURE IS KEY

"Temperature is key," McMillin states.

"Keeping the cold chain intact is important when handling cold root vegetables. For instance, horseradish likes it very cold."

"We keep our roots stored in the 28-30-degree Fahrenheit range, which is much colder than most retailers or wholesalers can, because of the combination of produce," he imparts. "It goes a long way in preserving shelf life and freshness."

Gumz agrees, saying, "Proper storage and handling are essential in preserving freshness and quality. Root vegetables, particularly potatoes and onions, should be stored in a cool, dry, well-ventilated area to avoid sprouting or spoilage."

Cady stresses, while they have a great shelf life, root vegetables still need tender loving care.

"Handle them with gentle movements and care to avoid bruising, cuts or abrasions," he advises. "Damage can lead to rot, decreased visual appeal to consumers, and loss of nutrients."

Retailers should also maintain clean, damage-free displays and rotate inventory regularly to minimize shrink and make sure produce employees understand the importance of handling root vegetables with care.

"Education on best practices at the store level helps ensure that product quality is maintained from farm to consumer," Gumz says.

TRENDS & OUTLOOKS

Most root vegetables are affordable, which gives them the unique advantage of being a healthy choice for cost-conscious consumers, particularly during uncertain economic times.

Their versatility goes beyond stews, soups and sides, which is why displaying recipe cards or QR codes linked to recipes is a great way

to boost sales.

Gumz stresses, "We strive to maintain pricing that is fair and competitive. At Gumz Farms, we've taken a long-term, sustainable approach to crop planning, which helps ensure reliable supply, even amid market fluctuations."

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“We also work closely with our retail partners to plan ahead and support consistent availability throughout the year,” she adds, “while focusing on quality, consistency and sustainability.”

But pricing depends on the balance of supply and demand, as well as increasing costs of labor. There are also regional differences in demand for different commodities within the category.

“We have been working hand-in-hand with growers to try to keep prices down with a focus on efficiency from the farm into packing through shipping,” McMillin says.

As consumers increasingly seek transparency, sustainability and locally grown produce, demand for packaging that highlights food origin and eco-friendly farming practices resonates among shoppers.

CUSTOMER CONNECTION

“At Gumz Farms, we see great value

in connecting the customer to the farm, highlighting where and how the produce is grown,” Gumz says.

Packaging innovations that keep root vegetables fresh and easy to store, while increasing shelf life, are gaining in popularity.

“We offer the widest range of packaging options out there,” McMillin says, “with 5-, 10-, and 50-pound bags, as well as individually shrink-wrapped roots. Shrink wrap is our newest option, with the ability to extend shelf life, as well as promote different brands through private labeling.”

“We also private label or promote through individual hang tags without the shrink-wrapper,” he adds.

Resealable packaging appeals to consumers seeking the convenience of already cut, diced and seasoned options.

“Duda Farm Fresh Foods is the only fresh produce brand that offers

Above: Consumers tend to think of potatoes, onions and sweet potatoes as root vegetables, but the produce category also includes carrots, beets, radishes, turnips, parsnips, ginger, garlic, yams, cassava, celery root, rutabaga, jicama and horseradish.

stand-up pouch bags that give consumers three options that are resealable,” Towell says. “This allows merchandising at the retail level more opportunities to market the product with brand and product visibility due to the standup packaging.”

Other trends in root vegetables include a growing demand for specialty roots, such as celeriac and Jerusalem artichokes, as well as less common, nutritious vegetables, like turnips and rutabagas, and a growing popularity of using the entire root vegetable.

Displays that show how to incorporate the entire root vegetable into a recipe or meal could be beneficial for shoppers. **BCT**