

Expand Your Vegetables Offerings Beyond the Ordinary

Consider extending your selection to include vegetables that call out to customers' creativity as a chef, preserver and gardener.

By Jeannine Bogard

There will always be that core group of vegetables everyone wants and is willing to seek out — the varieties that their grandfather grew, their mother canned, or their neighbor shared. However, be prepared for vegetable gardeners who have evolved to become culinary adventurers or want to challenge their growing skills.

To stand out from the standard local mass market selection, look to expand your garden center vegetable category with varieties that align with food and garden trends.

Healthy Snacks from the Garden

Bite-sized and easy-to-prepare snacks continues to be on trend — and what could be easier than picking ready-to-eat fresh snacks right off the plant? Cherry and cocktail tomatoes, snacking peppers, mini cucumbers, and snap peas are top sellers in the produce aisle and will do very well in the garden center, too. All-America Selections has awarded several varieties that fit this category with AAS Winner status: snap pea 'Snak Hero', cucumber 'Green Light', tomato 'Candyland Red' and pepper 'Just Sweet' are recent winners.

Some Like it Hot!

Super-hot chili peppers have a strong following, particularly with those who love ethnic foods such as Mexican, Asian, Brazilian, African or Indian, to name a few. Visit a local ethnic grocery or restaurant to find out what chilis your customer base may be eating or preserving. Most likely, they would prefer to grow their own. There is an abundance of exciting new chilis and hot peppers coming to market that will appeal to any number of chili lovers.

Be ready for those customers seeking out the hottest-of-the-hot with Scoville units that sizzle: 'Carolina Reaper', 'Scotch Bonnet', 'Ghost' or classic habanero.

On the milder side, recent visitors to my trials were searching for fresh little black chili peppers used in Asian cooking. 'Chenzo' fit the profile of what they needed: 45,000 scoville units, hot and sweet, 2-inch-long taper. An African-borne colleague prefers 'Atomic' at 90,000 scoville units, which his family soaks in vodka to make a pepper sauce. He says 'Atomic' is here to play!

For those wanting "entry" level heat, jalapenos, serrano and Hungarian wax peppers may still raise a sweat for those with sensitive palates.

Keep in mind that the frutescens or baccatum species, from which many hot peppers derive, have very long maturity times: 90+ days from transplant into the garden. Offer larger-sized containers of chili peppers of more advanced plant size so customers can enjoy earlier harvests.

Space-Saving Vegetables

Initially, dwarf hybrid veggies were referred to as patio edibles — and a new category was born. However, with the next generation learning to garden, and a tendency to take descriptions quite literally, be careful not pigeon-hole this expanding class to the patio or a single application. What if customers don't have a patio? Can you increase sales by

offering space saving veggies in a wider range of pot sizes from packs to gallons?

Breeding innovations have created veggies that are more proportional in size to today's garden situation while still producing substantial harvests. Position these varieties as the solution for those with limited space options. Whether transplanted to a container, hanging basket, vertical wall or a small patch in the garden, varieties with compact, determinate habits and an abundance of easy-to-pick fruit will be attractive to both beginner and experienced gardeners.

Tomato 'Sweet 'N' Neat' has scarlet or yellow cherry tomatoes and checks the box as both a snack item and a space saver. It can be kept in container as small as a gallon to tuck into a window box or planted in raised garden bed.

Cage Programs

Pre-caged tomatoes are showing up more frequently at retail. For the space- and time-challenged consumer, the opportunity to avoid putting any additional effort into a tomato over the season is very tempting. In addition to main season sales, cage programs can provide opportunity to extend the selling season for those who forget to purchase their tomatoes earlier.

Sadly, many times the wrong variety is placed in the cage. Is putting a tomato that matures anywhere from 40 inches tall to 6-7 feet in length appropriate for a container with a cage at best 18-24 inches tall? Would a space saving variety whose size at the end of the season is proportional to the cage size be more appropriate?

The questions retailers need to ask is what is the purpose of the cage and the expectation of the consumer over the season? Is the consumer expecting a "one and done" situation where they take the tomato home and it will remain proportional to the cage and container? If the cage is to assist the grower in transport to



Snap pea 'Snak Hero'



'Basket of Fire' chili peppers



Tomato 'Sweet 'N' Neat'



Squash 'Brice'



2021 is The Year of the Garden Bean, the featured vegetable for the National Garden Bureau's "Year of" program.



Cauliflower 'DePurple'

retail and keep the variety tidy on the retail bench a tag should be included instructing the consumer to transplant to the garden.

The Garden Pantry

Gourmet gardeners will be on the lookout for vegetables that call out to their creativity as a chef, preserver and gardener. Inspire their culinary endeavors with exotic, colorful and unusual crops such as unique flavored herbs, crispy microgreens, dwarf okra plants, baby-sized eggplants produced on spineless plants, or compact ground cherries that can be planted in hanging baskets.

Odd-shaped vegetables such as oblong tomatoes or a round squash that can be stuffed like a pepper are also appealing. Colorful veggies are on trend — look for red, yellow, orange, bicolor, purple or black versions of their traditional sisters to make a statement on the plate.

Don't Overlook Direct-Sown Seed

Garden-ready transplants provide a jump on the season for early harvests, but not every vegetable is best suited to be offered as a transplant. Direct sow to the garden is still popular and your seed racks should offer a range of easy to seed crops such as lettuce, peas, corn, beans, radishes, beets and carrots.

Did you know that 2021 is The Year of the Garden Bean, the featured vegetable for the National Garden Bureau's "Year of" program? Second only to tomatoes in garden popularity, beans are deserving of a year of celebration. A fresh-from-the-garden favorite, beans also adapt quite well to containers while maintaining their productive harvests. Provide signage for how-to and cross-merchandise containers, and cages or trellises for support near the seed racks. Beans can be sown 2-3 inches apart in a container.

Cool-Season Vegetables — The Forgotten Season

With the first signs of spring, folks want to rush out to purchase frost sensitive tomatoes and peppers. Despite our longing for vine-ripe tomatoes, it is more appropriate to have benches filled with crops tolerant and forgiving of unpredictable and variable spring conditions, including cooler soils and/or a light frost.

Cool-season options can fill the shoulders of your vegetable selling season. The most common of the cool season crops are Brassicas, which include kale, chard, collards, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and cabbage. Best grown from transplants sold in large packs, Brassicas are easy to grow and fun to watch develop in the garden. Longer maturing crops will even extend the last harvest through fall.

In mild winter regions, there is an additional window to offer cool season veggie transplants in late July to early August for fall-winter harvest periods. With the addition of heat and stress tolerance to the newer genetics, many brassicas are easier to grow than ever.

Another crop to offer are peas, which thrive under cool early spring temperatures. Oftentimes thought to be "wet feet" sensitive during rainy spring conditions, snap peas perform exceptionally well in containers, and the shorter vine varieties are quite attractive in hanging baskets. Peas blend well with cool season edible flowers. Let your customers know potted peas placed on the patio is a great way to avoid compacting muddy soils when heading out to harvest a quick snack.

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