

Fruit News article June 2016

Those of you who don't sell produce directly to the public don't get the daily experience of answering customer questions. I enjoy educating the public about what we do, and most of the questions are excellent, however sometimes the questions can be a challenge to answer. The lack of basic, general knowledge regarding things we all take for granted can make the conversation an uphill battle. I provide educational school tours for children during the year, and I am forgiving of their lack of education. It's the lack of education pertaining to agriculture that many adults possess that can be frustrating at times.

The following are a few of the questions I have received from *adults* over the past 25 years in the retail setting. Think about how you would answer:

- Phone call regarding Pick-Your-Own: "Do we need to bring our own stepladder to pick strawberries?"
- Question regarding our CSA boxes of fresh produce: "Someone told me that you treat all your produce with liquid nitrogen." "Is all the produce we receive really frozen?"
- "My shoes got all muddy in the pumpkin patch." "Why don't you pave sidewalks through the patch to make it a better experience?"
- "Why do farmers spray GMO's on their crops?"
- "Is your cider made from *real* apples?"
- Customer looking at the "Freestone" peach sign: "So there's no seed in these peaches?"
- After telling a customer that we are out of Honeycrisp for the season (in February): "Will you be picking more next week?"
- "When are you going to pick more bruised apples?"
- "Are these nectarines vegan?"
- Customer: "Can I use my Farmers Market Nutrition Program Check for bananas?"
Me: "No ma'am, the produce you purchase with those checks must be grown in Pennsylvania."
Customer: "Well, how about the oranges?"

Then of course there is the weekly, sometimes daily question about pesticides. The most frustrating thing about the health concerns customers have about pesticides is while I am explaining how we safely use pesticides, the customer stands there holding a donut and a soda, and then they walk out the door and light up a cigarette. It's almost like a Saturday Night Live skit.

I'm sure any of you in direct retail have heard interesting questions too. While these questions can be amusing to those of us who spend our lives around produce, to the customer these are serious questions that need to be knowledgeably answered with a straight face. It helps to remember that many people are four or more generations removed from the farm. As of the last census, only 2% of the U.S. population was directly involved in agriculture. The knowledge chain has been broken.

If I could wave a magic wand, the growing of food and all of its components would be taught at some point in our secondary educational system. I am not concerned with everyone learning to farm, but some basic scientific education about where food comes from and what it takes to get it to the market should be part of essential education. Concepts like seed planting, watering, composting, pests (IPM/organic), plant growth and basic animal husbandry. This education would help to make the

connection between the farm and the food we eat and help to create a healthy respect for nature. However a magic wand is not something I should ever possess, for reasons I will keep to myself.

Since there is very little agricultural education in our school system, I see it as my responsibility to educate the public every day and tell our side of the story, and I hope you do too. It's in both the consumers and farmers best interest to create an open dialogue. Keep telling your story in the farm market, on social media, in your e-newsletter, and on the street. The more the public knows about what we do in agriculture, the more backing we have when we are pleading for the state legislature to pass the budget and save Cooperative Extension, pleading for immigration reform, begging for less regulation and any other farm related issue that comes our way. I encourage you to do the same at every opportunity. Our consumers need to be better informed and we can't rely on our education system or the media to do this. You are the expert in the field. You are a partner in growing the safest food in the world. Consumers are receptive to listening to the local expert and respect your knowledge now more than ever. Take pride in agriculture and share your knowledge.

Tad Kuntz
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