

# Fresh Herbs Take Center Stage

*As consumers experiment with a variety of dishes at home, their interest in fresh herbs is rapidly growing.*

BY KIMBERLY RINKER

**Fresh herbs have gone mainstream. Once found only seasonally in health food stores and upscale specialty grocery outlets, fresh herbs are nearly ubiquitous year-round in produce departments throughout North America.**

"Fresh herbs set the stage for the whole produce department," advises Michele Henning, vice president, sales and marketing, for Shenandoah Growers, Inc., based in Harrisonburg, VA. "You've got a highly perishable item in a highly perishable department, and the fresh herbs are the image builder for that whole department."

Ryan Cherry, director of business development, International Herbs, Ltd., based in Surrey, BC, Canada, states, "Although fresh herbs won't be your No. 1 or even in your Top 10 items, more of your regular consumers are purchasing them, particularly with the influx of cooking shows. More consumers are becoming involved in their culinary experience at home."

Henning believes consumers who visit a particular store to purchase fresh herbs are more likely to purchase all their produce items from that outlet. "If consumers know they can get fresh herbs in your produce arena on a daily basis, they're likely to have confidence in the rest of your produce department," she adds.

According to Chick Goodman, vice president, sales and marketing, Herb Thyme Farms, Inc., based in Compton, CA, "Fresh herbs are one of the hottest trends in the produce department. Fresh herb sales have seen double-digit

growth in the past decade. It's no longer the gourmet chefs who are using all kinds of fresh herbs — now we've got the soccer moms involved. Using fresh herbs is seen by the average cook as a quick and efficient way to add flavor to home meals."

Henning agrees, adding, "Retailers used to ask me five to 10 years ago, 'Fresh herbs?' Now they don't say that anymore. Produce managers want fresh herbs in their departments because they realize how much these items reflect a positive image of the whole department."

## EMERGING TRENDS

The herb market is flourishing because fresh herbs complement the fresh and organic trends and because they're key ingredients in many recipes.

Woodland Foods, Ltd., Gurnee, IL, offers fresh herbs and caters to a wide variety of customers. Paul Suhre, product manager, explains a heightened ethnic base has spurred fresh herb sales. "With various ethnic restaurants opening, the public is exposed to new flavors and dishes they didn't have in their communities 20 years ago. People in the United States are now really comfortable with Mexican cuisine because it has been here for over a decade. The mom-and-pop home-meal preparers, however, still aren't comfortable trying the more exotic cuisine. Still, the younger crowd, who tends to eat out more at a large array of exotic restaurants, is more likely to cook exotically at home, which translates to more fresh herb use."

According to Jenni Simcoe, sales and marketing, North Shore Greenhouses, Thermal, CA, "Since people are developing more sophisticated palates due to the popularity of farmer's markets, cooking shows and celebrity chefs, they are experimenting with new flavors. Our basil line offers consumers the chance to use unique varieties of basil that in the past were hard to find outside of a farmer's market. We offer consumers several varieties of basil, including Thai, lemon, lime, spicy and opal in addition to regular basil."

## DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS

Successful growers tend to establish relationships with retailers in close proximity to their growing operations because fresh herbs have a relatively



short shelf life. According to USDA, the majority of fresh herb production in the United States occurs in California and Florida, where growing can take place 365 days a year. However, advances in handling, storing and transportation have also helped to expand options for growers in other states.

"Each greenhouse that we use has a range of 500 miles," explains Henning. "We don't go beyond that radius, as it compromises our product's freshness. Our greenhouses are highly efficient and automated to create a year-round, consistent product."

Freshness is the main priority growers strive for when delivering product to retailers, she stresses, adding a quick turn-around from the grower to the retailer is imperative for successful sales. "Herbs are extremely

ensure safe transport from field to kitchens were created. "In retail, all our fresh culinary herbs come in the clamshells," explains Herb Thyme's Goodman.

Two traditional types of clamshell packaging, polyethylene terephthalate (PET) and polylactic acid (PLA), accommodate most fresh herbs for shipping, display and storage. A high-tech plastic material, PET is used almost exclusively for food packaging and is 100 percent recyclable. PLA is a clear, naturally based plastic made entirely from corn and is 100 percent compostable. Micro-perforated bags are also used for packaged

herbs, primarily for foodservice herbs and for basil at the retail level.

"We use PET and PLA clamshells," reports Goodman. "Our chains want one of these for their private labels, depending on the demographic of their shoppers."

If fresh herbs dry out, become wilted or turn black before purchase, the retailer must discard them and the sale is lost. If the herbs deteriorate after purchase, their purpose is nullified and the consumer is less likely to purchase them in the future. "Herbs are delicate, and changes in shelf life can wreak havoc on them," Goodman explains. "Clam-

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perishable," she notes. "Once the herbs are harvested, they start to dry out and their oils begin to evaporate almost immediately."

International's Cherry advises storing the majority of fresh herbs at 40° F. "It's impossible to have a specific environment for each one, but that's the standard. The best thing retailers can do is keep fresh herbs away from misters. Moisture will further deplete their characteristics."


#### **PACKAGING AND SHELF LIFE**

When hydroponic environments first enabled growers to cultivate fresh herbs on a year-round basis, they also helped trigger additional usage by upscale restaurant chefs. This, coupled with the public's increasing desire for no-salt dishes, pushed chefs at all restaurant levels to experiment with fresh herbs and to demand not only more of the traditional herbs but also more exotic varieties. As a result, containers to






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## Evolution Of The Market

**F**resh, dried and powered herbs have been used in kitchens since ancient times. Revered for their culinary and medicinal uses, these delicate plants consist of more than 80,000 varieties; the name originates from the Latin word herba, meaning green crops. Originally, fresh herbs were not cultivated but were harvested wherever they grew naturally. As demand increased, fresh herbs evolved into viable, cultivated crops.

The use of fresh herbs in meal preparation has sparked increased sales of traditional favorites, such as basil, chives, oregano and parsley, because they are healthful flavor alternatives beyond salt, sugar or fat. "Ten percent of households are using 80 percent of fresh herbs," notes Goodman. "The broadening of American cuisines has led people to become far more adventurous in cooking."

The value of North American herb production is estimated to be over \$500 million and climbing annually — with a global estimate in excess of \$60 billion — according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). In all cases, fewer than 100 vari-

eties dominate 80 percent of the market, according to the USDA's National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service.

Many cooking shows, culinary magazines and cookbooks call for fresh herbs in meal preparation. "Cooking shows are helping to drive the market," Henning explains. "As consumers become familiar with more exotic dishes thanks to the abundance of TV cooking shows, they have begun to migrate back into their home kitchens."

Patrick Killiany, produce manager, Giant Food Stores, LLC, a Carlisle, PA-based chain with 147 stores, cites cooking shows and a demand for flavorings that are healthful and natural as two reasons behind strong herb sales. "The trend of flavoring dishes has been driven by cooking shows," he notes. "Sales are reflective of other trends, such as organics, based on consumers looking to be more healthful when they cook."

Shenandoah Growers' Henning reports, "Fresh herbs are mirroring the entire produce department. There is tremendous attention on eating fresh and organic products — and food safety."

**pb**

shells act like storm windows, adding a controlled atmosphere and 20 percent more shelf life to herbs."

Clamshells definitely prolong the life of fresh herbs and provide for less initial damage in shipping and display, adds Shenandoah Growers' Henning. "We've seen huge growth in our 2- and 4-ounce clamshell packages. Herbs are so delicate. Every time you touch an herb, you potentially damage it. The clamshells are great protectors for containing herbs, as most damage occurs at the retail level."

North Shore Greenhouses markets its herbs under the North Shore Living Herbs label. "Our herbs come in a clamshell. They're living herbs with the roots attached," explains Donald Souther, sales manager. "Consumers buy what we like to think of as a mini greenhouse. They store the clamshell in the refrigerator and when they need herbs, they just clip off what they want and return the clamshell to the fridge. It definitely extends the life of the herbs."

North Shore is in the process of rolling out a new label designed to feature country-of-origin-labeling (COOL). The updated label has the UPC code and country of origin on the front with a recipe on the back.

Regardless of the type of packaging, Inter-

national's Cherry urges retailers to keep all displays neat and well-stocked. "If they're not properly merchandised, it doesn't look very nice. Fresh herb displays can become very messy very quickly. Be sure to display your Top 5 items — basil, dill, rosemary, mint and oregano."

### WHAT'S COMING UP?

As consumers continue to focus on more healthful lifestyles, growth in the sales of fresh herbs will increase. At home, meal preparation of organic and ethnic dishes and dining experiences at restaurants will stimulate consumers to purchase fresh herbs.

"Education at all levels is imperative," stresses Henning. "Proper signage with herb identification charts and recipes certainly help, but it's also important to educate the produce department staff, so they, in turn, can educate their customers."

Goodman agrees, adding, "Retailers are getting a double-deal with fresh herbs. You've got the fresh herb and organic trend in one package, and you have to inform consumers what to do with them. On each of our fresh herb packages we feature item-specific recipes to educate consumers how to use them. This kind of information is key for growth."

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