

Start your FREE one-year subscription to PRODUCE GROWER to secure our next issue.

Subscribe Now

COVER STORY

# Big picture packaging

Demands for sustainability and convenience are changing the way your fresh produce is packaged for retail shelves.

Jolene Hansen



Photo: Tiana Kropko

Fresh produce packaging has come a long way since the days when wooden crates met the industry's needs. Options that worked when a retailer's biggest concern was controlling heads of iceberg lettuce fall short in the face of modern consumer expectations and needs.

Andy Laible, marketing manager for South Carolina-based packaging supplier Sonoco Products Company, cites sustainability as the most significant driver in fresh produce packaging today. But while consumers often grab onto one aspect of sustainability, such as recyclable materials, Laible stresses a bigger picture.

That means considering shelf life, food waste and resources that go into all the sustainability-affecting steps of the chain. "It's important to keep the entire packaging life cycle in mind," Laible says. "It's not just how it performs at the end of its life, but what goes into the making of the package. What's the total impact? ... Sometimes that gets lost in the buzzwords and the hype around it."

Growing awareness of big-picture sustainability, along with convenience and improved technology, sets a high bar for how your produce appears on retail shelves. Understanding the interwoven trends behind packaging advances can help you meet consumer expectations and keep your product fresh and inviting on the shelf.

### Recycled and recyclable

With nearly four decades of industry experience, Craig Waite has seen demand for recycled content and recyclable materials in fresh produce packaging climb. As president of California-based packaging supplier Growers Container Company, Waite also notes a growing consumer awareness of the recycling practices of companies involved in produce packaging and production.

As one example, Waite points to waxed corrugated boxing's fall from favor as non-wax-coated materials with improved recyclability take their place. Similarly, some producers have moved to returnable plastic containers alongside recycled plastic content. "It's all part of reducing the amount of packaging going into landfills, so it's more cradle-to-cradle than cradle-to-grave," he says. "Retailers are looking to advertise improved recyclability, be more green and do more to show [sustainable practices]."

## “More brands want something unique & eye-catching that also has that sustainable look and feel to it.”

As vice president of Ohio-based Produce Packaging, Katie Schwab finds wholesale customers want more packaging with specific percentages of post-consumer recycled materials. That, in turn, gets promoted on labels and in stores. But Schwab underscores the big-picture view of uncompromised shelf life and 100% recyclability—including labels.

When labels on your packaging aren't recyclable or can't be fully removed, sustainability efforts become moot. "People look at something and say, 'This is recyclable,' but if you haven't done A, B and C before you throw it into the recycle bin, it's really not recyclable," she says.

### Reducing waste

Produce packaging professionals understand that balancing sustainable materials with shelf life is key to successful consumer experiences, but consumers may miss the big-picture link.



Photo courtesy of Sonoco

Laible points to plastic-wrapped produce, often cited as examples of irresponsible plastic use. "The statistics say that you get three to four days of shelf life out of the cucumber in its natural state, but you get 14 to 15 days when it's wrapped in plastic overwrap," he says.

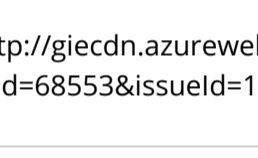
ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT



## HELPING THE WORLD GROW SMARTER

Fluence creates advanced lighting solutions for controlled environment crop production. We apply the latest research in photobiology, evidence-based design, precision engineering and advanced technology to foster a healthier and more sustainable world.

Learn more at [www.fluence-advance.com](http://www.fluence-advance.com)



OSRAM  
© Copyright 2018 Fluence Bioengineering, Inc.

(http://giecdn.azurewebsites.net/advertisement/click?adid=68553&issueid=103645&subscriptionid=null)

In an industry where Laible says estimates put food waste at 30% to 40% of everything produced—whether it's thrown out by the grower, the retailer or the consumer—packaging's overall impact can't be ignored. He believes scientific innovations in additives and coatings to replace plastics will change the industry going forward.

Waite reflects on a time when existing technology made recyclable resins and shelf life an either-or choice. "For quite a long time, you weren't able to do the two together. Now we can," he says. "More is coming out every year in new structures that maintain freshness and shelf life, but have recycled content and are much more sustainable."

Schwab reports an uptick in customers looking for biodegradable packaging, but again, the shelf life challenge steps in. "Produce by its nature can be wet or contain water and leach into packaging," she says. "Something paper-based or biodegradable can start to break down or not look good, but it's definitely something people are looking at."



PHOTO © Adobe Stock | Nestor, Kristina

### Convenience and customization

In a world where everyone wants their products their own way, fresh produce packaging is ripe with opportunity. "That's where packaging plays the biggest role," Laible says. "With packaging, you can create a serving size that's ideal for your consumer."



He credits changing consumer habits with the explosion in snack-sized fresh produce packaging. People snack more, but want healthier alternatives. Portable, on-the-go packaging lets consumers snack where and when they want. Newer sealing technologies, such as top-seal and peel-reseal packaging, make snacking even more convenient and mess-free.

"Produce is right in the sweet spot there, being able to provide something that's better for consumers with the packaging that helps them with this snacking on the go," Laible says. Noting the proliferation of snack-size packaged produce in convenience and gas stores, he adds, "These are new inroads and new channels where fresh produce packaging makes an impact."

Schwab echoes the demand for smaller sizes. "We don't have much demand for large or family-size packaging, except on food service accounts. It's usually single serving or servings for two people," she says.

End consumers aren't alone in their desire for convenience and customization. Retailers and other wholesale customers want convenient, ready-to-eat, ready-to-display options, too. "There's no stopping it," Waite says. "We get more inquiries every year for those types of solutions and value-added services. It's driven from the retail side and gets pulled through."

Schwab says demand for fresh-cut services is especially high. Retailer struggles with labor, food safety and consistency in cuts have led to the rise in demand. While traditional cuts remain mainstays of the services, fresh-cut trends such as spirals and rices have also grown.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

## RAISING THE BAR

Bayhorse Gold is a consistent 14 to 22 pounds and carries a 400-gram firm. The company's unique orange fruit with solid dark green foliage.



**Honeynut** is a single-serving, bite-sized variety. This is a widely available variety that offers high yields at exceptionally lower cost.

**Anthem 2R II** from Seminis produces with the top performance of Anthem 2R with the benefits of Anthem 2R II. Performance Series traits of Anthem 2R are consistent yield.

**Syngenta** is a high-quality, consistent variety with a 400-gram firm. The company offers intermediate resistance to Fusarium wilt race 1. This early maturing, Syngenta, combination has good stand-out with red leaf and small-medium pip size.

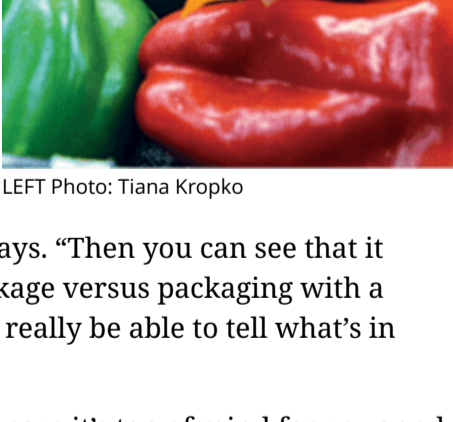
**RAISING THE BAR** IN QUALITY, FLAVOR, AND YIELD. Bringing you the best products in partnership with PackAmerican Seed, Seminis, and Syngenta. See What Good Yields? 800-700-1199 • ruppseeds.com

(http://giecdn.azurewebsites.net/advertisement/click?adid=69264&issueid=103645&subscriptionid=null)

### Increased product visibility

Waite reports that minimizing the packaging-to-product ratio remains an important trend—consumers want to see before they buy. This desire for greater transparency can be at odds with some sustainable packaging options. For example, popular biodegradable packages such as molded pulp trays reveal less of the product. In the end, it falls to the brand to decide what their consumers value more.

Schwab's customers want packaging that showcases the product. "[Consumers] pick something up and turn it over and look at it from all angles," she says. "Then you can see that it really is quality throughout the package versus packaging with a small window where you might not really be able to tell what's in there."



LEFT Photo: Tiana Kropko

While this demand isn't new, Laible says it's top of mind for his end consumers. "We've done consumer studies ourselves, and always the first thing people say is that they want to see the product, especially in produce," he says. "One bad experience with a molded or rotten tomato is going to ruin my experience and make me think twice about buying the brand again."

### Brands and branding

One force behind fresh produce packaging trends is widespread produce branding. It wasn't long ago that the only fresh produce brands were names like Chiquita and Dole. Brand-savvy consumers—interested in brand history, supply chain and social responsibility—changed the game. Packaging can help your product shine, build your brand and tell your story.

Waite points to changes in rigid clamshells as an example. "Companies might use a proprietary mold unique to their company to make it stand out in the produce aisle," he says. "More brands want something unique and eye-catching that also has that sustainable look and feel to it."

In the past, brands using environmentally friendly water-based printing inks looked dull and unappealing next to solvent-based inks that made colors pop and consumers buy, even though they weren't environmentally sound. "Now water-based inks are every bit as appealing from an aesthetic look," Waite says. "It's environmentally conscious but also presents some really appealing packaging that consumers are going to want to buy."

Laible says the move to top-seal packaging has provided a branding boost. "A clamshell by its nature only leaves a small area for a label. With top seal, you essentially have the whole front of the packaging for branding and product information," he says.



LEFT Photo: Tiana Kropko

"With printing techniques, graphics and colors, brands can really stand out on shelf." As brand awareness builds, so does brand trust. Packaging plays a pivotal role in driving consumers to your products.

### What's ahead

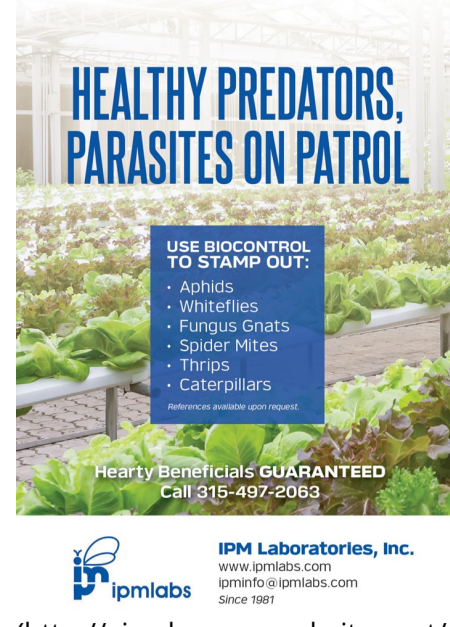
With these inter-connected trends redefining fresh produce packaging, more change is sure to come. Laible reports that many companies and organizations in produce-related industries are turning to collaboration that will produce new ideas and new packaging goals. For example, producers and packagers may work directly with recyclers or label suppliers to ensure recyclability or tackle similar challenges.

## “It's not just how it performs at the end of its life, but what goes into the making of the package. What's the total impact?”

"Rather than moving in different directions, they're leaning into better solutions for what they're doing or working with," he explains. "It's more about fixing the system. ... You see a lot of collaboration, communication and conversation, and I think that's really good. We want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem."

Waite believes that embracing sustainability trends and related innovations is critical to the fresh produce packaging industry's future success. "I think anyone who's staying on the sidelines is kind of missing it," he says. "For me as a business, to be able to continue to prosper, we have to keep moving forward. I think anybody who decides that the status quo is okay, those guys are not doing very well or they're out of business."

The author is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to GIE Media publications. Reach her at [jolene@lovesgarden.com](mailto:jolene@lovesgarden.com)



USE MICROFILMS TO STAMP OUT: Aphids, Whiteflies, Fungus Gnats, Spider Mites, Trips, Caterpillars

IPMvibros  
IPM Laboratories, Inc.  
www.ipmlabs.com  
www.ipmlabs.com  
800-700-1199

(http://giecdn.azurewebsites.net/advertisement/click?adid=60509&issueid=103645&subscriptionid=null)