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Potatoes, oranges driving fresh produce sales

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C O P I N G *with* COVID-19

By Craig Levitt



COVID-19 shopping restrictions have now been in place for six weeks. Not surprisingly, fresh produce sales have ebbed and flowed in this time. According to IRI, for the week ended April 12 dollar sales of fresh produce were the highest since the week ended March 22.

Much of that could be attributed to fresh vegetables, which was up 25.6 percent compared to the similar time period last year. Fresh produce sales were 16.3 percent, up from 14.2 percent for the week ended April 5. Fresh fruit sales once again saw a slight dip, up 7 percent, down from 7.4 percent the week prior.

Consumers are still splitting their produce purchases three ways — fresh, frozen, shelf-stable — and it while fresh sales are enjoying a bump, frozen (up 44.6 percent compared to last year) and shelf-stable (up 41.8 percent) remain leagues ahead.

“There has been some concern in the industry that consumers are perhaps refraining from purchasing fresh produce out of safety worries,” said Jonna Parker, team lead, fresh for IRI. “There certainly seems to be anecdotal evidence of that, but we’re also seeing somewhat lower household engagement for the four weeks ending April 5, at 94.6 percent versus the 99.3 percent household engagement over the 52-week look. This difference could indeed indicate some people pulling back on fresh produce. At the same time, our survey work shows that 18 percent of consumers plan to purchase more fresh foods and the rising produce growth rates are evidence of that.”

As has been the case since the onset of COVID-19, potatoes remain the lead growth driver in the produce department. The week ended April 12 saw the second-biggest increase, up 74.3 percent (the week ended March 22 was up 114.7 percent). Of note within fresh vegetable sales was asparagus, which was up nearly 30 percent after being up only 1.4 percent the week prior and down more than 8 percent two weeks prior.

On the fruit side, berries had the highest weekly sales at \$158 million, while oranges and lemons, up 58.4 percent and 43.6 percent, respectively, had the greatest increases.

“Oranges are on a remarkable growth path,” said Parker. “Since mid-March, orange sales has been up around 60 percent each week year-over-year. I suspect this is directly related to the versatility of oranges as a snack, side or in smoothies, as well as the health halo it enjoys among consumers, particularly related to building the immune system. Calling out nutritional benefits of various fruits and vegetables was something we encouraged grower/shippers and retailers to do pre-pandemic and even more so now.”

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