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Signs for strong citrus season abound

By

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January 13, 2021

In 2020, Sunkist Growers commissioned a study to learn the reasons why citrus sales were more popular than ever. They discovered it wasn't just because shoppers were preparing for COVID-19 quarantine.

The study revealed that 58 percent of those buying more citrus this year were doing so because of health reasons, looking to get more vitamin C in their daily lives. A large number of buyers were also looking for produce with a longer shelf life, and understood that when stored in a refrigerator, citrus could last for weeks and keep its great taste.

Data from IRI showed the citrus category across all varieties saw increased demand in 2020, with more than 20 percent increases year over year. Nationwide, orange sales have seen a 37 percent increase, lemons have seen a 19 percent growth, and grapefruit is seeing a 12 percent increase.

Thankfully, it's been a strong year for citrus and that's set up a promising winter season for the category.

"Mother Nature provided excellent growing conditions, and the fruit is tasting great," said Christina Ward, director of global brand marketing for Valencia, CA-based Sunkist Growers. "This winter, Sunkist has promotable volumes of all citrus varieties."

Craig Morris, category director for citrus for Homegrown Organic Farms, predicted a very good winter season for 2021.

"In some ways, it will be better than last year," he said. "It's definitely going to be different, without a doubt. It's going to be a successful year and when the dust settles at the end of the year, we will see some varieties that have outperformed others in years past and others and some that may not do quite as well."

He does expect retailers to rely more on the staple citrus items and predicts that specialty citrus items may not perform as well, simply because people aren't looking to experiment during the pandemic.

Homegrown has stayed successful by being committed to organic farming as the rise in demand for organic citrus continues to increase year after year—with 2020 being perhaps the most successful it's ever been.

"Everything you do — from how you plant it, how you pick it, how you grow it, and how you market it — plays into being successful, it's hyper-strategic."

Just as there are no quick fixes to how you grow citrus, Morris noted there's also no quick fixes for

marketing. “Because of that, you have to be looking way down the road, understanding your crops and working closely with your retailers so you can marry their promotions along with your volumes that you have coming on,” he said. “There are no quick fixes — to do a Hail Mary in organic marketing would be detrimental.”

Levon Ganajian, vice president of retail relations for the Fresno, CA-based Trinity Fruit Co., has seen an increasing trend for private label expanding across the board, particularly with citrus, and this is an area the company is looking to capitalize on.

“Our dedicated marketing team has worked closely with our retail partners to expand our private label offering for all our citrus varieties and we expect this retail trend to continue,” he said. “We see the demand due to the pandemic. We see similar demand as last year and we expect the trend to continue throughout this year.”

Jeff Olsen, president of Visalia, CA-based The Chuck Olsen Co., noted the USDA box program was a big shot in the arm for the company and the citrus industry as a whole, and really helped keep the market strong during the pandemic.

“We believe 2021 will continue to be strong and are looking forward to a more normal environment in the months ahead,” he said.

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