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**NEPC Expo Returns for 2021**

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By

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The last time the New England Produce Floral & Food Service Expo was held the NEPC was celebrating its 20th anniversary and things were looking great for the produce industry. Of course, that was back in 2019, before the pandemic resulted in the cancellation of the 2020 show.

The NEPC will back with a vengeance in 2021, welcoming people to its 21st birthday, Sept. 29-30 at the Hynes Convention Center in Boston, providing a great opportunity for show exhibitors and attendees to share the industry's latest products and services.

"Most of all, we are excited just to be in-person and be together," said Laura Sullivan, NEPC's executive director. "Doing a regional show, it's allowing the people to be at a trade show event without having to travel a great distance."

Having a safe event is the No. 1 priority for everyone involved with the NEPC, and the expo will follow the City of Boston's mandate that masks will be required at the show for all exhibitors and attendees.

The Convention Center has brand-new protocols in place and an upgraded air filtration system, so everyone is expecting the show to go off without a hitch.

"The produce industry is a people industry — they like being together and doing business together, and I think everyone is tired of the Zoom conferences," Sullivan said. "It's important for us to be together."

A reception will be held the night before the event at Kings Dining & Entertainment, a casual way for people to just meet up and have fun.

As always, the NEPC will offer a series of great speakers.

"There's a lot of great education surrounding our event this year, which we are really excited about," Sullivan said. "For instance, Tom Barnes will give us some data information about the spike of organics through the pandemic and what the landscape looks like going forward."

Then Suzy Badaracco, president of Culinary Tides Inc., will deliver a seminar entitled How to Use Strategic Thinking to Navigate Trends for 2021 & Beyond: A Future Without Fear.

The keynote breakfast will be held at the Marriott Hotel, not the Convention Center.

For the keynote, NEPC is featuring Joe Watson of the PMA and Anne-Marie Roerink of 210 Analytics who will be presenting the lecture, "E-Commerce: Making It Work for You."

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“They will really delve into the e-commerce segment of the business, and how that took off during COVID-19,” Sullivan said. “They will look at if that’s going to maintain, if it’s going to increase or if it’s going to level off. Anne-Marie will provide a lot of the data information and Joe will talk about the implementation of that data.”

The NEPC committee expects numbers to be a bit lower than what it saw in 2019, but the numbers as of mid-September only showed about a 10 percent drop, with two weeks left that could see that total rise.

“We are seeing great attendance from the New England retailers and even many retailers outside of the region,” Sullivan said. “We are seeing that the retailers that normally bring their produce managers are holding back this year on that.”

Another change is that the Center for Growing Talent will not be matching students up with produce professionals since colleges are weary about students going to an event and coming back to campus.

“We’re pretty happy with the commitment on the exhibitor side as well as the attendee side,” Sullivan said. “This is a great opportunity to see some new product lines and foster relationships. The produce industry thrives on these relationships.”

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