

Merchandising, Distribution and Marketing Nopalitos and Cactus Pears

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Our company has been exceptionally successful in marketing new fruit and vegetable products. At this time we have over 400 items distributed to retail grocery stores in all 50 states and in several other countries. However, introduction of new items is usually a long slow process. My mother, Frieda Caplan, first introduced Kiwi fruit to the United States in 1962 but it took more than 18 years for Kiwi fruit to be a successful, well known commodity in the United States. The first thing my mother did was to change the name from Chinese gooseberry to Kiwi fruit. The one exception to the general slowness of the industry to adapt a new crop was the introduction of the habanero chile pepper, which is the hottest pepper commercially grown in the world. This was an overnight success. Part of the success was no doubt attributable to the widespread acceptance of hot spicy food among Mexican and Asian cultures. The existing familiarity with hot spicy food made introduction of a similar product much easier.

In this regard, because there are so many Mexicans who appreciate nopalitos and so many Europeans of Mediterranean descent who appreciate cactus pears, we have an advantage in marketing cactus products that we did not first have with kiwis.

As the name change from Chinese gooseberry to Kiwi fruit greatly facilitated the market development of this fruit, I have suggested that the fruit of the cactus be known as "cactus pears" rather than prickly pears. Prickly connotes an uninviting fruit and does not tell the uninitiated that the fruit comes from cactus. It has been gratifying to learn that the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization Cactusnet has also adopted the name cactus pears instead of prickly pears.

While there is considerable marketing advantage of cactus pears over kiwi fruit because many Europeans and Mexicans are aware of this fruit, most newcomers to the fruit have a strong aversion to the seeds. These people do not know whether to swallow them, spit them out, or chew them up. It is my opinion that the presence of large hard seeds in cactus fruit is the single largest barrier to widespread increase in market acceptance. It is my understanding that there is some controversy among the scientists as to the theoretical possibility of completely eliminating the seeds. If the seeds cannot be completely eliminated, every effort should be made to reduce the numbers, size, and hardness of the seeds. Assuming reasonable levels of sugar can be achieved, the most important breeding objective for cactus pears should be reduction in seediness. It would be useful to have some standard score for the buyers to compare seediness among varieties.

I would urge cactus producers not to sell direct to large supermarket chains, but to develop a good long-term relationship with a reliable marketer. Some of the large chains will do their best to get the lowest possible price from you. A good marketer, (such as Friedas), with nationwide distribution is in a better position to stand firm on market price to large chains than small individual growers.

I cannot stress enough the importance of working with excellent leading chefs like Jay McCarthy, Matt Martinez, and Michael Thomson. These are the people who are making the national trends that will carry over to good retail sales in grocery stores. Ensure that these chefs have the best possible product and listen to their requests for product quality and availability.

It is also important to realize that you nopalito growers here today are not in competition with each other. Rather, you are in competition with the many other vegetables in the Texas and U.S. market. It is to your advantage to work together to have uniform product standards for the nopalito industry.

Lastly, I am very proud to mention that cactus pears and cactus leaves are part of our Lost Crops of the Americas line. This product line had its inception in discussions with Dr. Noel Vietmeyer at the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. This has been a major and expensive development program at Frieda's but we feel from a heritage and business standpoint it is a responsible decision. Lost crops in this program include quinoa, blue cornmeal, oca, various beans, posole, tamarillos, cherimoyas, cactus pears, etc.

In summary, my recommendations are (1) refer to the fruit of cactus as cactus pears rather than prickly pears, (2) have the breeders standardize the seediness in cactus pears for comparative purposes, (3) have the breeders develop varieties with fewer, smaller, and softer seeds, (4) growers should work through a reliable marketer/distributor in dealing with major supermarkets to maximize your price, (5) provide chefs with the best products you can and work with them to stimulate the demand for cactus products, and (6) the growers should work together to standardize terminology and grades of nopalitos and cactus pears.

It has been a pleasure working with the growers, chefs, medical scientists and university researchers at this meeting. I look forward to continued growth of our industry through these cooperative efforts.