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PLANET-FRIENDLY PRODUCE

Consider sourcing sustainably grown produce for your store—it could be a differentiator for today's ethical shoppers

By Day Helesic

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT a cute little symbol, a frog surrounded by the words "Rainforest Alliance Certified" or a Fairtrade Canada seal could influence a sale in your produce section?

Coffee, tea and cacao, regularly certified by organizations such as the Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade Canada or UTZ already make appearances in certain areas of the store, but today's ethical shoppers are looking for certified products in every aisle, including in the produce department.

For chains like Whole Foods Market, sustainability is an important part of its brand story. "Whole Foods seeks out growers who support environmental and agricultural sustainability," says Gary Macdonald, Whole Foods' purchasing director in Toronto. In 2007, the retail chain created the Whole Trade Guarantee to highlight its commitment to ethical trade, working conditions and environmental practices.

Then, in 2015, Whole Foods launched the Responsibly Grown rating system, which rates fresh produce and flowers based on farming practices that impact the environment and human health.



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“We take great care in selecting and working with the best third-party certifiers in the world,” says Macdonald.

The Rainforest Alliance offers certification to farmers who follow the Standard of the Sustainable Agriculture Network. The organization currently certifies products such as coffee, tea, cacao, flowers and more than 50 different varieties of fruits and vegetables. Certification helps ensure that soil and water are conserved, deforestation is prohibited, that there are better workers’ rights and no slave or child labour.

Another third-party certifier, Fairtrade Canada, certifies almost 7,000 products, including coffee, flowers, fruits and vegetables. Fairtrade certification ensures sustainability across social, economic and environmental pillars: there are minimum prices for Fairtrade products, working conditions are decent and there are fair terms of trade for farmers and workers in developing countries.

Grocers may do well to jump on the opportunity to appeal to the ethical shopper. “Canadian consumers now look for ethical and sustainable foods when they shop,” says Nicole Pasricha, manager of market transformations at the Rainforest Alliance. “Six out of 10 Canadians say they consider themselves ethical shoppers, and they expect retailers to consider social and environmental factors when making purchasing decisions.”

Fairtrade Canada has also noticed a substantial increase in demand for certified products. “We’re seeing significant growth in the ethical consumer market,” says John Marron, director of commercial relations and marketing at Fairtrade Canada. “These consumers want to know where their products are coming from and they want to support socially conscious companies.” In Canada, Fairtrade bananas are particularly popular. “We’re seeing a 19% volume growth in Fairtrade bananas, year over year,” says Marron. “Many national and regional chains now offer them year-round.”

Food market analyst Kevin Grier has another take. “Research shows that there is a segment of consumers who are concerned

about sustainability or similar attributes, but it’s not big, it’s 5 to 10%,” Grier says. “The vast majority of consumers are more concerned with the same things our grandmothers were concerned about: nutrition, value and taste.”

That said, he acknowledges that retailers are looking to pull ahead of their competition, no matter what. “Grocers, especially traditional banners, are desperate for differentiation. They want to position themselves to compete with higher-end banners, bringing in niche products like certified produce that shoppers with higher incomes will choose to spend money on.”

If you’re interested in sourcing sustainably grown produce, talk to your suppliers—they likely offer certified options. Today’s ethical shoppers may appreciate the effort, and it might even increase consumer engagement and give your business an unexpected boost.

Oranges growing on a Rainforest Alliance-Certified farm in Costa Rica.



On Rainforest Alliance-Certified farms, respecting workers’ rights is critical for maintaining certification.

RAINFORREST ALLIANCE

PRIVATE LABEL IS BACK

STORE BRAND GROCERIES ARE GAINING STEAM

One of the top strategies Canadians are using to save money is to switch to cheaper grocery brands, said Nielsen’s Jean-Baptiste Delabre at a session on private label at the SIAL Canada show in Toronto last month. As a result, private label is on the rise and now accounts for 18.4% dollar share, and is growing faster (+5%) than national brands (+2%).

Here’s a look at how private label is performing in

MEAT & SEAFOOD
30.3%



BAKERY
24.9%

