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Dates And Dried Figs: Not Just For The Holidays

When treated properly, dates and dried figs demonstrate sustained sales year-round.

BY CHUCK GREEN

Dates and dried figs, strictly for occasions like Christmas and Thanksgiving? Bah-humbug. “The grocery industry must quit treating these two items as if they’re only for the holidays,” declares Andrew Stillman, president of Amport Foods, located in Minneapolis, MN. “It’s a huge mistake.” For one thing, dates and dried figs are the healthiest of all dried fruits, says Stillman. Furthermore, both yield the highest antioxidant, fiber and mineral content and are “fairly reasonably priced,” he emphasizes.

“Far and away, dried fruits are more than a holiday item,” echoes David Nelson, vice president of merchandising for Yuma, AZ-based Bard Valley Medjool Dates. While it sees a spike in sales during the holidays, the company regularly moves dates throughout the year as well. “I think dates are an old commodity and people are accustomed to them,” he adds.

There’s been a turnaround in the popularity of dried figs over the years, adds Sal Vacca, president of AJ Trucco Inc., based in the Bronx, NY. “Years ago, when January came around, it was difficult to sell dried figs, especially the Greek varieties,” says Vacca. Today, almost year-round, the company sells figs from Greece, Turkey, Italy and California, though not in the same quantities it typically sells during Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Still, David Lukens, produce manager and stock supervisor for Akron’s West Point Market, based in Akron, OH, doesn’t necessarily buy into the notion that shoppers are swayed by the health benefits of dates and dried figs. “We’re a store that concentrates more on flavor, and people want flavor.”



Dates show the most year-round success when merchandised in the produce department.

SUCCESSFUL YEAR-ROUND DATE SALES

Either way, the produce director of a regional Northeastern supermarket chain who wished to remain anonymous, also says his stores successfully sell dates year-round and have experienced considerable success peddling bulk dates in 12- and 15-lb. display-ready boxes. “You get your tongs and pull them out and put them in a bag.” While he wouldn’t categorize it as “earth-shattering business,” he notes the stores ring up a couple thousand dollars in sales a week. Yet, he doesn’t believe that approach would pack the same punch among smaller stores with limited display space.

In any event, Stillman explains that, typically, grocers remove the two items from their shelves following the holidays based on old studies. “They think they’re only used for holiday baking, and that couldn’t be more incorrect,” he asserts.

COLORS THAT POP

Meanwhile, date specialist, Shaleen Heffernan, formerly of Jamaica, NY-based Agrexco (USA) Ltd., says her resellers would be on the right track by emphasizing colors that pop and contrast with one another when selling dates and dried figs. Further, a supermarket or retail chain should place them in the fresh produce section, preferably next to bananas, off of which the caramel-colored dates play well and draw customers’ attention, notes Heffernan. She adds that while bananas are the top-selling fruit and don’t require marketing, they’re most likely to give date sales a boost.

The unnamed produce director for the Northeast regional supermarket chain agrees with Heffernan. “What’s one of the highest penetration items in the produce department? Bananas. So where are you getting your most impressions and footprints and customer counts? In that area, of

course," he explains. "Therefore, if stores position dates next to bananas, they're probably reaching every person who enters the produce department," he states. Visibility is key, he insists.

However, Lukens suggests that bananas might be a distraction. "If you see bananas, you'll probably eat bananas. I find other things tend to get lost," he states. Instead, he prefers to cross-merchandise products such as fresh figs with cheese-related items, nuts or other fruits, like berries.

Whatever the case, Heffernan also recommends that gourmet stores with a deli section display dates in a glass jar and sell them per pound, or place them in bins for bulk sales. "They also should consider displaying dates in the candy and nut section, where dried fruits are particularly compatible, she observes.

AJ Trucco's customers usually display dried fruits in the fresh department rather than the grocery section to convey a sense of freshness instead of a dry commodity, explains Vacca.

METHOD TO MEASURE POTENTIAL MARKET

Amport helps hesitant retailers by providing a way to allow them to measure the potential market without committing shelf space, notes Stillman. The company puts out a shipper display — a mix of about 100 units — 75 percent of which can be sold as chopped dates, 25 percent pitted, without any signs of the holidays. He explains it's a way for stores to remind customers dates are available February through April, as well as the winter.

Whichever strategy is implemented, cross-merchandising can help stir multiple sales, Stillman adds. For example, when baking with dates, 50 percent of the time a recipe also includes a nut, he points out. He also recommends placing a baking table in the produce section with items such as dates, cherries and various nuts. Additionally, Amport offers takeaway recipe cards at baking tables, with every recipe calling for at least two items. The idea is to create an impulse sale by planting the idea of baking in the minds of shoppers who might have had no intention of it, he says.

Everything helps, especially considering that dried fruit remains a produce item that people tend to forget, Agrexco's Heffernan stresses. One way to overcome that is in-store taste tests, she notes. "I believe that people need to taste and sample them. If I could be in 1,000 places at once, I'd do it all."

While sampling might work, Stillman isn't convinced they would provide

retailers an adequate return on their investment. Instead, he suggests building a display, which would encourage year-round consumption.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Ultimately, however, some retailers might need a bit of a nudge insofar as thinking outside the box, admits Lukens of West Point Market. One idea might be to show customers various ways to use dates or dried figs, such as serving them as appetizers — anything apart from cookies and holiday breads — he explains. "In many instances, the main thing separating consumers from different ideas is a lack of imagination," adds Lukens.

It doesn't require much imagination, but retailers also must pay heed to the importance of proper sanitation, says the produce director of the regional Northeastern supermarket chain. "You have to keep the fruit clean. You're talking about bulk, sticky stuff that has to be presented in a sanitary environment."

Neither is much imagination needed for retailers to give dates their due beyond the holidays, although Stillman says that time of the year is an ideal period in which "to get people thinking about using dates." The

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**— Andrew Stillman
Amport Foods**

proof of their year-round viability is, so to speak, in the pudding, he notes, pointing out that, even in the summer, more people use diced dates in cereal, salads and new recipes. "It's the easiest way to put sweet into your salad. I can't speak for figs, but retailers are crazy not to make a permanent home for dates. If they dare to try, they'll see that."

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