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Some Fresh Foods are Convenient, Too

by

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In the supermarket, these days, one is assaulted by convenience foods -- snacks, meals, and desserts. Not surprisingly, many of these new foods are made expressly for the microwave oven now that about half of all US households have one. Microwaves seem especially popular with children and teens who can prepare a hamburger or popcorn in seconds, without dirtying a pan.

In general, convenience foods work against farmers. A prepared hamburger has less beef than a teenager would likely use if starting with ground meat. The microburger can also substitute for that afternoon standby -- a bowl of cereal and milk. And often the more processed the food, the more the processor gets in profits and the less is available for the farmer. There is not much the producer can do about this trend toward convenience foods, except to note that some fresh foods are convenient to prepare, too.

My particular favorites are spinach and acorn squash. Both cook in the microwave in minutes and, to my taste, are far more flavorful and tender than when cooked by slower methods. And what is simpler? With acorn squash just break off the stem, pierce the skin and put it in the microwave whole!

How many people know about these quick fresh vegetables? It is hard to say. Those who do, didn't learn about them at the supermarket where fresh vegetables compete with prepackaged (and labeled) convenience foods. A marketing opportunity is being missed in not

bringing to the attention of shoppers how convenient spinach, squash, and other fresh vegetables are to prepare.

What can be done? First, get a microwave and a cookbook and do a little experimenting cooking different kinds of fresh vegetables. Bulk producers then must work through handlers to have a simple sign like "Microwavable -- Whole 8 Minutes on High" put up in the supermarket or fruit stand. Farm stands and farmers market operators can try handing out recipe cards and giving personal recommendations, but only ones you have tested yourself. You can even produce your own convenience item such as prewashed spinach -- for rinsing spinach takes a consumer's time, too.

By doing so you can turn a problem such as microwaves into a benefit, a new use for existing products. Not every problem can be turned to an advantage, but the good marketer tries and often succeeds.