

## TASTE PREFERENCES OUTWEIGH APPEAR- ANCES OF APPLES

**W**hen it comes to apples, West Virginians will respond to taste over beauty. And, in recent supermarket tests, the apples many picked as best-tasting were those grown right here in the Mountain State.

Those are some findings from marketing studies conducted earlier this year by West Virginia University and the state Department of Agriculture. The studies were designed to test ways to increase sales of russeted Golden Delicious apples grown in West Virginia.

"We investigated two promotional strategies: one associating russet with superior flavor and one appealing to state pride," says Tara Baugher, WVU horticulture extension specialist and a member of the seven-person research team.

Why care about Golden Delicious? It's a popular variety, both for eating fresh and for processing into apple products such as pies and juice. More than 1.5 billion pounds of Golden Delicious apples are grown in the United States annually, including 47.3 million pounds in West Virginia.

Ironically, however, Golden Delicious apples grown in West Virginia do not sell as well as those grown in Western states. The reason, it appears, is appearance. West Virginia's humid climate causes the apple's skin to freckle, or russet, and consumers seem to prefer smooth skins over speckles.

The WVU study team wanted to see if a sales display could change that preference. The researchers also wanted to see how the West Virginia apples fared in taste tests when the origin of the apples was not revealed.

For the promotions experiment, russeted Golden Delicious apples grown in West Virginia were displayed next to smooth Golden Delicious apples obtained from the Pacific Northwest. The price was the same for both kinds.

Four types of treatment were tested in four randomly assigned days. In one treatment, both types of apples bore the same generic label. In another treatment, the West Virginia apples were identified as such with a sign and stickers. The third treatment used a display urging shoppers to "Taste a Real Apple," emphasizing flavor over color perfection for the russeted apples. The fourth treatment combined the two promotional strategies of taste and state pride.

"Whenever the 'Real Apple' poster was displayed, the russeted apples out-sold the smooth ones," Baugher says. "With-

Photos: West Virginia University



*West Virginia horticultural extension specialists and the state's department of agriculture studied how a sales display and taste tests could change the preferences of buyers when purchasing apples.*

out the poster, the russeted apples sale averaged 47 percent of the total; with the poster, that average increased to 62 percent.”

The study found insufficient evidence to indicate that the appeal to state pride boosted sales. Taste appeared to be the critical factor.

The taste test pitted the West Virginia-grown Golden Delicious against the same variety of apple grown in the state of Washington. The judges—150 customers at a Morgantown supermarket—tasted unlabeled slices of both apples and ranked them for texture, sweetness, juiciness and taste.

“The consumers ranked the West Virginia apples higher than the Washington apples on all four characteristics,” Cheves reports. “On a scale of one to five, the average overall rating of the West Vir-

ginia apples was 4.1, compared to 3.5 for the Washington apples.”

The lowest, average rankings were given to the sweetness and taste of the Washington apples, while the highest ranking was given to the taste of the West Virginia apples.

The taste test results suggested another promotion possibility: letting customers try before they buy.

“It appears that customers might respond positively to samples of high-quality West Virginia apples,” Cheves observes. “Results of the display experiments also suggest that consumers respond favorably to the idea that an apple with an imperfect appearance may taste better than one that is more appealing cosmetically.”

**Morgantown, W. Va.—**

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