Genetics give conventional fruits and vegetables heirloom taste

When you order a sandwich at Subway you can watch the guy lay out pink, anemic tomatoes on your sandwich like a Vegas blackjack dealer flipping produce. They are typically pink discs of disappointment. They are not the red thick tomato slices we remember from home gardens or roadside stands.

These tomatoes have suffered a fate of many traditionally-bred crops. Plant breeders have priorities, and a great tasting soft tomato has no value if it does not make it to market. This is why shipping and disease resistance have to be considered first, with consumer priorities de-emphasized.

At the same time the opposite is true about the “heirloom”. There is a perception that the “heirloom” varieties have some magical quality that render them superior to commercial varieties. Actually it is the opposite. An heirloom is simply a tomato that is missing the qualities that make them acceptable for commercial production. In other words, they may taste great but are susceptible to disease, are too small, or would not ship well. The seeds have great value, but only for specialty markets or home gardens.

So what if there was a way to merge traditional breeding and heirloom objectives? This is the concept of ***Consumer Assisted Selection***. I coined that term back in 2010 or so, as it frames our efforts to produce better quality fruits and vegetables starting with the consumer’s desires and working backwards to products. This is the strategy of the Plant Innovation Center at the University of Florida.

How do we make better tasting fruits and vegetables? By listening to consumers first, and then using genetics to hit the target they define. This is an exciting new track now driving breeding objectives in tomatoes, strawberries and blueberries, among other crops.

These are new heirlooms, and they open an exciting peek of what is coming in plant genetic improvement.

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