

By focusing on pest, herbicide resistance, GMOs failed to win over public

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The agricultural biotechnology industry has failed in two key ways. The first is about marketing: from the start, genetically engineered crops have lacked appropriate advertising and consumer information.

The second failure relates to the disproportionate focus on crop protection, such as pest or herbicide resistance, which mainly benefit farmers' production costs. Only a small proportion of this benefit passes on to consumers.

Some true GM jewels have meanwhile failed to make an impact. Golden rice received far better public support compared to insect or herbicide-resistant crops, but by the time it emerged in the late 1990s, GE negativity had taken hold.

Scientists have recently succeeded in dramatically increasing protein content in potatoes and cassava. This promises to improve nutrition in many parts of the world. If the first GM crop had been golden rice or a high-protein potato, public perception of the new technology might have been very different.

When I think about the opportunity we have missed with GE foods, I think of Flavr Savr tomatoes. I would have loved to try one: sweet, juicy, beautifully red and yet crunchy, great for a salad with mozzarella, basil and olive oil and a sprinkle of sea salt. If only I could buy them in the supermarket.

As one of the first licensed GE products, 1997 saw its withdrawal. Why did it fail? Instead of putting any emphasis on the benefits to the consumer, much of it turned into tomato puree, marketed as 10% cheaper to manufacture. Would you have been drawn by an advert offering such dazzling features? I guess not.

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