

By Visión y Servicios president Eric Viramontes

✘ It is safe to say than in life a basic rule to follow is "never assume and always ask the right questions". It's an important point to take on board when we look at the discussion there has been lately on how to label produce grown in protected environments.

Some are saying that only produce grown inside facilities that have high investments in technology should deserve the term "greenhouse", while others define this as a general term that refers to produce grown "indoors" and should not be owned by a limited group of growers in certain regions of the world.

This has been an argument that almost feels like a marketing war. In fact, there is an organization that has come up with its very own definition, offering a third party certification to distinguish the elite group that can be part of the privileged club. They assumed that since they have a great investment in infrastructure, they should get a higher price for the product.

In some way they are totally right. These companies have a greater investment in the ground with steel structures of glass or plastic covers, heating systems, and some even with artificial light and yes, grown in an artificial medium. In fact is correct to say that they have the right technology for the growing conditions of where their companies are located.

Maybe the question is whether their locations are the correct ones, but that is not my or the consumer's decision. Where I believe the assumption is mistaken is in thinking that the consumer is responsible for paying for this extra technology required to get the job done.

Another poor assumption from my perspective is thinking that high tech operations refer to a certain definition. You see, in the agricultural word using technology means looking for ways to enhance your nature's growing conditions, and it does not necessarily compete against nature.

Any plant like tomatoes or cucumbers need special climate conditions like temperature, humidity, carbon dioxide, sunlight and the right nutrition, just like any other living being. Providing these conditions is going to produce better yields - the plants require certain protection from the elements in order to be able to harvest and pack high quality produce; protection from high winds, excessive sun radiation, excessive heat, dust animals, or precipitation in any format such as rain, hail or snow.

So what does technology have to offer? Protected horticulture technologies have been

developed for a great diversity of climates so today's growers have a great diversity of different technologies. So maybe efficacy is more about location. So it is up to the grower to choose the correct technology and to use the accurate technique to deliver what the market demands at the right price.

It is as easy as this - the more elements you have to manage, control and protect, probably the higher the investment and cost of production is going to be.

There are some parts of the world where you will find almost ideal growing conditions for certain crops, where only small investments in technology are needed. In other areas where there are low temperatures, limited sunlight and harsh conditions, if the decision is to grow despite these challenges, the technology is available but just at a higher cost.

There are other things to consider such as sustainability. I like the question, "how green is your greenhouse?" It's a good thing to ask if you have to burn large quantities of fossil fuels to keep the right temperature for the crop inside, and use tons of energy to provide the required artificial light that the plant needs in its life cycle.

I wonder if the consumer needs to know all about the technology behind their vegetable that they are about to eat, or to just assume that the grower is doing the best job to deliver a high quality clean and safe product. One thing I do know is that consumers like high quality, they want to eat safe food and they love reasonable prices.

Today the word productivity should not only define how much you can yield out of a certain growing operation. I believe that in our world today, the right definition for productivity is being able to yield in an efficient, sustainable, competitive and profitable matter, and not just hope that the consumer will pay the extra cost just because you have really cool definitions that are certified by a bunch of elite growers.

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