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Carrots now coming in a range of colors

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By Don Curlee - Ag Columnist

At least one well known comedian and a whole bunch of red-headed fourth graders are in danger of losing the significance of their characteristic "carrot top" nicknames. Carrots, at least in California, are taking on a range of new hues, but still in the spectrum of most hair color.

Not surprisingly, the center of this revolutionary movement is a company called Colorful Harvest, located in Monterey. It maintains growing grounds in Merced, the Salinas Valley, Watsonville, Oxnard and Santa Maria. Its colorful production areas out of state extend to Florida, Chile, Mexico and Peru.

The company's CEO and managing partner Doug Ranno, told Vegetables West magazine recently that the company regards itself as an industry leader in the colorful fruit and vegetable business

To prove his point he told magazine editor Patrick Cavanaugh that Colorful Harvest also is the exclusive national marketer of Green Giant Fresh's berry program. It includes strawberries, blueberries, blackberries and raspberries.

In addition to the seven colors of carrots produced by Colorful Harvest a corn in a scarlet hue is available. The commitment to colorful products and vigorous response to them by consumers has attracted several other growers and shippers asking Colorful Harvest to apply its marketing expertise to help them reach consumers who appreciate bright colors in the fruit and vegetable products they buy.

Packages labeled as "Rainbow Crunch" contain whole carrots and carrot chips ranging in color from very pale, almost cream color, to the bright orange normally considered carrot color. The shape of the whole carrots also varies from slim fingerlings to chunky mouthfuls.

Ranno explains that the red coloring in the carrots as well as other fruits and vegetables indicates the presence of lycopene, which reportedly has cancer-fighting properties. In the corn the red signifies anthocyanins, powerful antioxidants which many agree have a positive influence on a variety of health conditions.

Developing the carrots that reproduce themselves in colors across the prism has taken years for Ranno and his partners. Consumer acceptance, with a boost from a more health conscious population is helping them reap the harvest of the time and effort.

In the three years that the multi-colored carrot crop has been in the market it has been brisk for the unique products offered in cello bags, in bunches and for processing into various canned and frozen products.

The bulk of California's carrot production is expected to remain with such giants as Grimmway Farms and Bolthouse, with their gigantic growing grounds in Kern County and the Coachella Valley. Both seem content to offer more traditional-colored carrots.

Nobody has yet decided whether the familiar carrot on a stick will provide more incentive if it is offered in designer colors. Horses, renowned as fervent carrot lovers,

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might be the ultimate judges. Or it might be Bugs Bunny offering his favorite line, "What's up Doc?" when he first encounters a carrot in stunning mauve.

Don Curlee - Ag Columnist

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