

EXTENSION BULLETIN 318

Freshening Vegetables for Retail Sale



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MICHIGAN STATE COLLEGE
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EAST LANSING

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Freshening Vegetables for Retail Sale

By RAYMOND A. HIGGINS¹

The trade saying that "vegetables properly prepared are more than half sold" has a vital element of truth in it. Yet many retail grocers—as well as farmers selling at retail markets—have often given little attention to the "freshening" of highly perishable vegetables prior to retail sale. Vegetables which have bruised, wilted, dirty, damaged or decayed portions when placed on display may appear so unattractive to the customer, on first glance, as actually to repel him. In this condition, they can be said to have "*repulse*" value. Properly freshened, however, vegetables have "*impulse* value"; their attractive appearance gives the customer an immediate impulse to buy.

Methods used in preparing vegetables for retail sale vary from one store to another, yet all successful operators follow certain basic principles of preparation. They are:

1. Broken, damaged, decayed, discolored, and unsightly portions of the vegetable item are removed.
2. The item is kept as large a value to the customer as is possible.
3. The item is trimmed in such a way it will keep fresh longer, and can be retrimmed if necessary.
4. Dirt is removed. A cold-water dipping is given those items needing it.
5. The item is "unitized" for convenient and attractive self-service retail sale.
6. Man-hours are held to a minimum, consistent with maximum safety to the trimmer.

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AN EFFICIENT WORK AREA

The equipment necessary for an efficient freshening operation need not be expensive or elaborate. But it should be arranged so as to permit a smooth "flow of work"—one which will eliminate all waste motion, provide for safe use of tools, and make proper freshening of vegetables easy. The schematic drawing illustrates what a proper flow of work should be (Fig. 1).

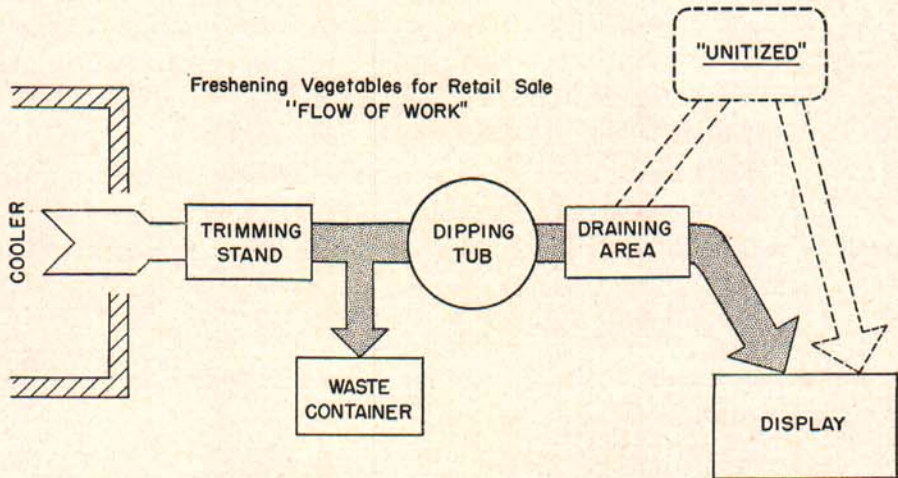


Fig. 1. Efficient arrangement of equipment can make the flow of work from cooler to display smooth and easy.

In most retail produce markets, freshening or "trimming" is done in the back room, away from the sales area. Whatever the particular arrangement for the freshening operation, sufficient space and proper location of equipment will pay large dividends by reducing labor cost, eliminating trimming accidents, and providing "better and fresher" produce for customers. Have all of the tools needed as close to the location of their actual use as possible.

A "trimming stand" has proved to be of value in many stores (Fig. 2). The cutting surface of the stand is used for trimming cauliflower, cabbage, and sweet corn. The stand also acts as a bench for holding the crate of celery or head lettuce, when trimming those items held in the hand over the waste container. The stand pictured was made from

$\frac{3}{4}$ " plywood, 31" long by 18" wide, mounted on two orange crates. A $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 4" knife-slot is located near each end of the board, above small boxes which completely enclose and protect the knife blades. A $1\frac{1}{2}$ " x 2" slot cut in one corner of the board provides a handy holder for the crate opener. The waste containers are placed flush with each end of the trimming stand, allowing two workers to use the table at one time.

PROPER USE OF THE TRIMMING KNIFE

Costly accidents often result from careless use of the trimming knife. To prevent injury, lost time, and medical expenses, follow these suggestions when trimming.

1. Use a sharp knife having a 5- to 7-inch blade.
2. Always cut away from yourself. Use a good slicing action, so that the knife blade does the work.

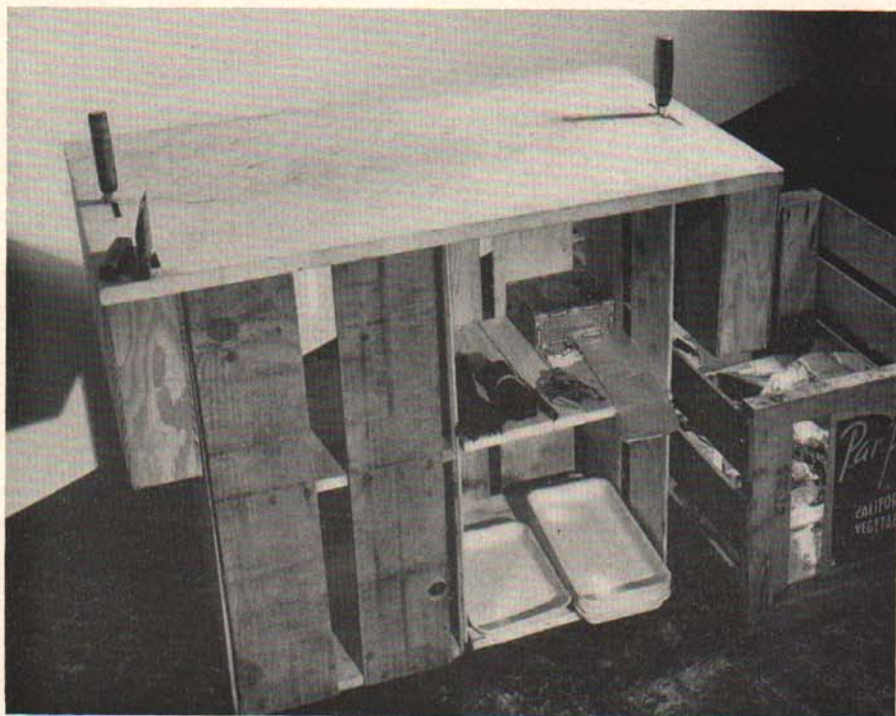


Fig. 2. An efficient trimming stand made from orange crates and $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood. Note that the knives are within immediate reach, but are fully enclosed when not in use to protect both the produce workers and the knife-blade itself.

3. Know where the knife blade is going. Set the knife at the point where you want to cut, before you make the cut.
4. Always keep your free hand in *back* of the knife blade.
5. Always put the knife in the rack when not in use.

HOW TO FRESHEN LETTUCE

Proper freshening of head lettuce requires the three main steps described in detail here.

Step 1—Starting at the top of the head, pick off all damaged, yellow or decayed outer leaves, leaving as much as possible. (Fig. 3.) Break off the brown or damaged tips of leaves or any injured areas. Break any stubs off the base.



Fig. 3. Step One in freshening head lettuce; remove unwanted outer leaves.



Fig. 4. Proper method for trimming the butt-end of a head of lettuce.

Step 2—Bracing the head firmly at your side with the butt-end out, stroke a thin slice off the butt—taking off only enough to remove discoloration (Fig. 4). Start the stroke at the highest rib to prevent cutting into the leaf stems.

It is important that you do not cut into the face of the head itself. If you do, the cut edges immediately begin to bleed and turn brown or pink. It is much less noticeable if you *pinch off* any decayed or damaged portions, leaving the edge rough (like the natural character of the leaf edge).

The reason for starting at the top and working down, picking off the leaves—rather than starting at the base, cutting the butt, and then letting the leaves fall off—is that less leaf-waste results.

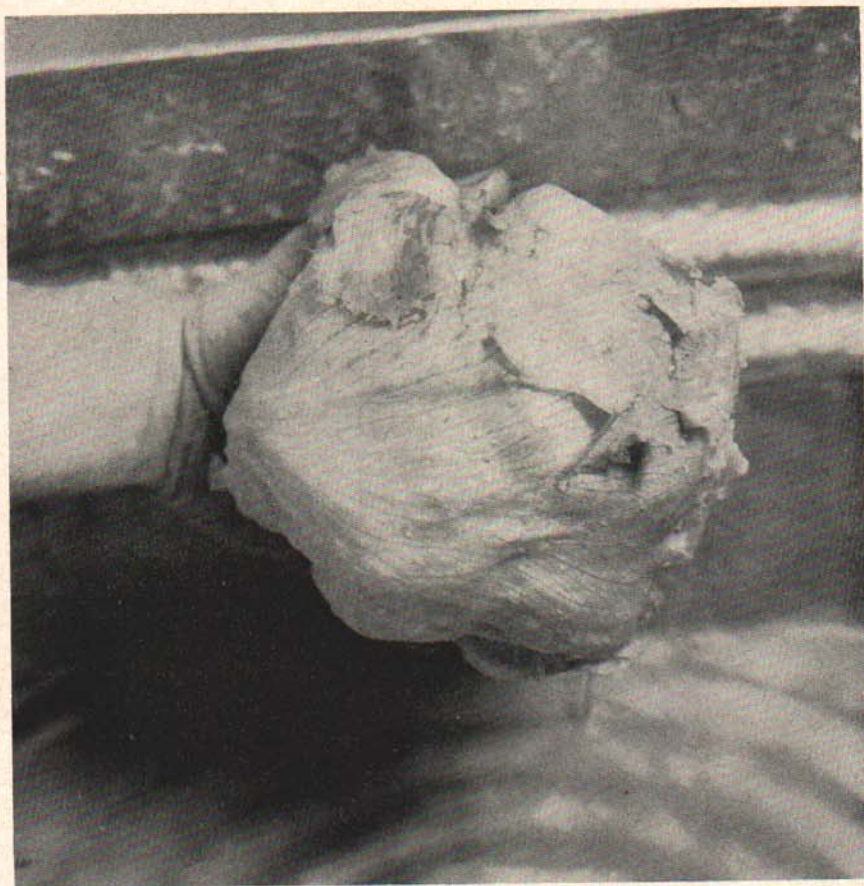


Fig. 5. A cold-water dip not only removes the dirt but leaves the head of lettuce with a crisp, attractive appearance.

Step 3—After trimming, dip the lettuce in cold water with a “crown-in-the-water, crown-out” motion. This motion through the water carries away all dirt without soaking the center of the head or causing excessive breakage of leaves. Water carries away unsightly dirt, gives lettuce a needed drink to replace moisture-loss, and adds sparkle to the display (Fig. 5). *Do not soak head lettuce in water.*

Some retailers find it profitable to place head lettuce, after trimming, in transparent bags; or to place a rubber band around the head. Such protection against leaf-breakage while on display in many cases



Fig. 6. Lettuce wedges, and edible portions salvaged from vegetables otherwise salable only at a mark-down, were combined to make up this attractive "salad tray." Also an excellent example of what is meant by "unitizing," such items have the added appeal to many customers of immediately suggesting a favorite salad-combination already prepared for the dining table—a spur to so-called impulse-buying. A different attraction is offered the customer whose needs would make it uneconomical to buy separately even the smallest unit of each vegetable represented. To the retailer, the appeal of realizing profit from an expected loss should be obvious.

pays for the higher cost of bagging or banding by decreasing the mark-down loss.

SAVE THOSE SHEARED LETTUCE HEADS

Occasionally, a retailer gets some lettuce in which several of the heads packed along the edge of the crate are partly sheared. He then wonders what use can best be made of them, or about some method of trimming them. If you have that problem, try this suggestion.

Those heads can be cut into wedges, and the wedges placed on a food tray. The food tray is then draped with portions of tomato, cucumber, radishes, carrots, or peppers—all of which may be salvageable from items that would otherwise take a mark-down or be a complete loss. For instance, radish tops which are slimy make the radishes unsalable, but the radish roots are still edible food. Trimmed up, the radishes can be used. The completed unit is then overwrapped with film. (Fig. 6, page 9.)



Fig. 7. Step One in freshening celery; remove the bad or broken stems.



Fig. 8. Take extra care when trimming celery stalks. Remove only enough of the unwanted tip-ends to freshen; pick unsightly leaves off by hand.

This lettuce-wedge "salad" can be a good seller. Most retailers who have tried it have found that it develops into a regular feature of the department, and they use fresh as well as salvageable produce for the tray units. It practically eliminates mark-down or throw-out loss on those items used.

HOW TO FRESHEN CELERY

Freshening celery also takes three main steps.

Step 1—Remove any stems which are badly damaged, decayed or broken (Fig. 7). If an inner stem needs removing, make a V-cut and lift it out so as not to damage the outer stems which "lock" it in. Take off no more than is absolutely necessary. Keep the stalk as big a value to the customer as possible. If the small upper portion of a stem is damaged, remove only that small portion.

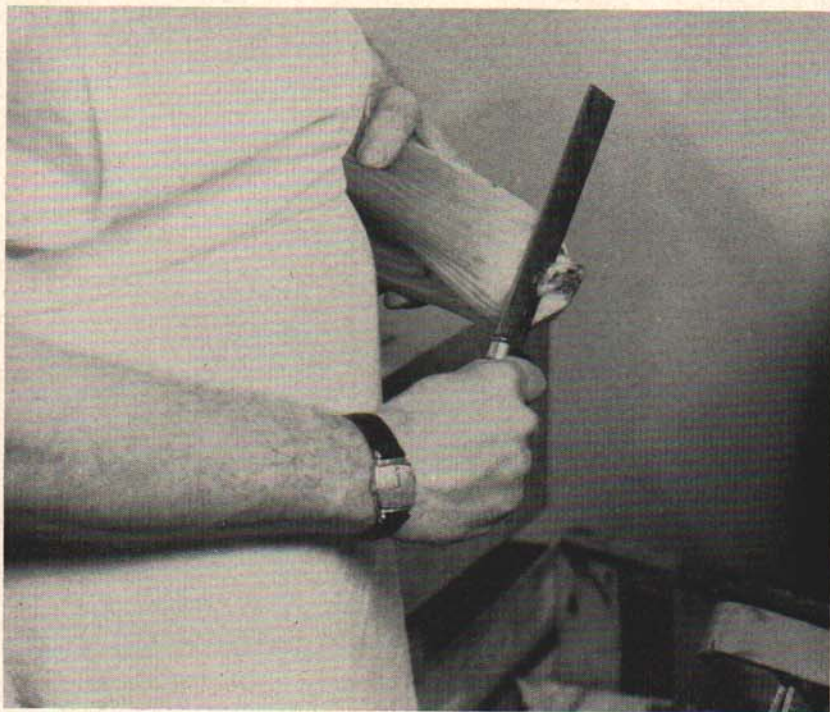


Fig. 9. Sharpen the butt-end of the celery to a blunt point, by rotating the stalk as you slice down and away from you.

Step 2—Hold the stalk firmly at the leaf line, and stroke a thin slice off the top of the stalk. Gauge the slice to remove only the dried-out tip-ends of the stalks (Fig. 8, page 11). Discolored or damaged leaves should be picked off with the fingers of the knife hand.

Step 3—Brace the stalk firmly at your side, and stroke three or four slices off the butt—slicing down and away, and rotating the stalk to sharpen the butt to a blunt point (Fig. 9). This method leaves most of the butt as a reserve supply of moisture and nutrients to the stalk, prevents cutting into and loosening the outer stems, allows for possible retrimming, and gives sales-appeal to the celery.

Celery should be washed before it is placed on display. If dirt persists, use a brush. A rubber band placed slightly below the leaf line will prevent breakage on the display.

TRIMMING FOR CELERY HEARTS

In trimming for celery hearts, remove slightly more of the outer stems than when trimming pascal celery. This gives a whiter "bleached" appearance. Tops can be given a "flowery" appearance by removing the upper portion of the stem just above the leaf spurs. Band together two or three stalks with two rubber bands, by placing one at the leaf line and the other two inches from the butt.

Some retailers salvage the outer stems removed in trimming—by banding them together, trimming the ends square, and selling the item for soup celery. Care must be taken not to over-trim celery hearts, with soup celery in mind.

TRIMMING AHEAD OF SALE

Large-volume stores must frequently trim celery for the heavy weekend traffic in advance of sale. Two good methods for maintaining crispness in trimmed celery are:

1. The trimmed celery stalks can be placed butt-down in a tub containing 2 inches of water and ice. Besides keeping the celery crisp, this system makes it easy to place rubber bands around each of the upright stalks, minimizing breakage.

2. The trimmed stalks can be submerged in ice-water in barrels or tubs for a period of up to 18 hours. But the water must be changed daily, and the barrels cleaned once a week, to prevent odors from accumulating. Some retailers keep the celery barrels in the walk-in produce cooler for better freshness-control.

With either method, celery hearts placed in tubs or barrels can be given a more "bleached" appearance by adding a few slices of lemon to the ice-water.

A SAFE, FAST TRIM FOR CAULIFLOWER

Here's a fast, safe method of trimming cauliflower that will make the flower a "work of art". There are five main steps.

Step 1—Use a solid cutting surface which has a slot for the trimming knife near the right edge, and a crate alongside to catch the



Fig. 10. The technique of trimming cauliflower is simple, but should be followed carefully. To begin, **BACK** the trimming knife into the leaves until the blunt edge touches the flower itself.



Fig. 11. Now turn the cutting edge down, and slice off the leaves near the crown by rotating the head as you cut.



Fig. 12. When trimming the butt-end of a cauliflower, make the cut level; the head can then be made to stand upright while on display. Use the knife to brush the trimmings into the waste container.

trimmings. Place the cauliflower head on its side. Remove the knife from the slot; *back* it low into the flower between the leaves, until the blunt edge of the knife touches the flower (Fig. 10).

Step 2—Turn the knife blade down; then draw back on the knife, slicing the leaves off about level with the crown of the flower. Rotate the head, continuing to slice the leaves off until they are trimmed completely around (Fig. 11).

Step 3—Turn the head around so that the butt-end faces the right edge of the cutting board. Now slice far enough through the butt to remove any discoloration, and to make the butt level so the head will stand upright on display. With the knife blade, push the trimmings off the edge of the cutting surface into the waste crate, and return the knife to the slot near the edge of the board (Fig. 12).



Fig. 13. Pinch out the inner leaves of the trimmed cauliflower head outward to expose more of the flower.

Step 4—Pick up the head; carefully pinch out the inner green leaves which curl over and hide the flower. This shows as much whiteness as possible. Break off any outer leaves or stubs which are yellow, damaged, or decayed (Fig. 13).

Step 5—As a final touch, a large rubber band can be stretched over the face of the flower and butt, and a clip-tag clamped to the rubber band at the face of the flower. The head is then weighed and the price marked on the clip-tag (Fig. 14). This shows the size of the head and its price to the customer, removing the necessity of turning the head over on the display.

These clip-tags come in strips and are quite inexpensive. The butts may also be marked to avoid any confusion as to the correct price, if tags are accidentally switched or removed.

Empty berry-boxes placed on the display rack make excellent holders, keeping the cauliflower heads from rolling.

If the cauliflower will be kept cool on the display, it should be dipped in water before displaying.

If there is a bruise on the face of the flower, do not slice the face with the knife. Slicing it with a knife leaves a smooth-cut surface, which is not the natural character of the flower. Instead, use a stiff brush to brush off the bruise; or if a brush is not available, use the tip of the knife to pebble-off the bruised or damaged portion. This effectively removes the discoloration without destroying the natural pebbly type of surface which is attractive to cauliflower-fanciers.

Keeping the green leaves on the cauliflower head not only protects it against bruising, but also offers the customer two vegetables for the price of one—properly cooked, the green leaves are just as tasty as green cabbage.

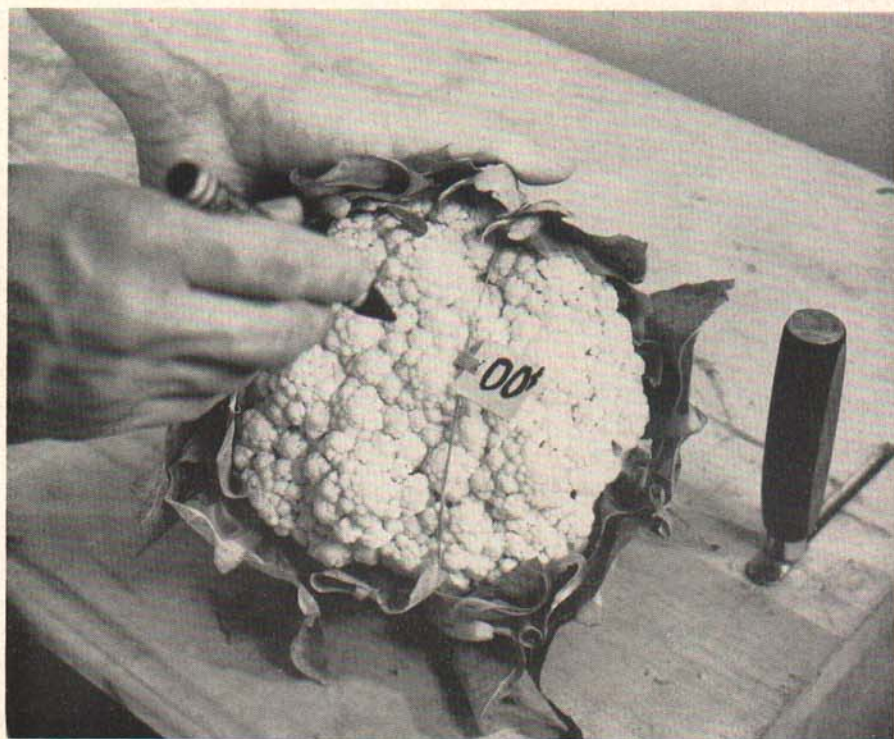


Fig. 14. A clip-tag, fastened by a rubber band around the cauliflower head, is the best means showing the price. Many retailers also mark the price on the butt to avoid mistakes if the tags should be switched.

ELIMINATE WASTE MOTION IN TRIMMING CORN

Some retailers feel that the costs of retail-clerk labor prevent them from showing off sweet corn to its best advantage. If that has been one of your problems, try this easy trimming method. It eliminates nearly all of the time-consuming waste motion of the more common practices.

Step 1—Pour the sweet corn out onto a solid cutting surface. Grasp one ear of corn and slice the butt off to the desired shortness (Fig. 15). Turn the ear around.

Step 2—Slice through the cob at the tassel-end, at a spot which will remove the undeveloped tip and any worm-injury—but do not slice completely through the leaves. Hold the blade of the knife down on the leaves, and lift the cob to make an inch-wide strip down one side of the ear (Fig. 16). Lay the trimmed ear aside and go to the next ear.



Fig. 15. Sweet corn should be trimmed for length at the butt-end.



Fig. 16. A narrow strip down one side of the ear is the best method of exposing sweet corn for display. This can be done in the same motion while trimming the tassel-end—by not slicing quite through the leaves on the underside, and then raising the cob up and away from the knife.

This makes use of the necessary motion of laying the ear aside to expose the cob, and offers corn which still has the attractive green leaves on it. The inch-wide strip down one side of the ear shows more of the corn to the customer than the "small window method."

FRESHENING CABBAGE

It is important that a good job of freshening be done with cabbage, so that the new cabbage—with its suggestion of garden freshness—is not made to look like "old" cabbage (Fig. 17, page 20).

Starting at the top (the same as with head lettuce) and working down, pick off those outer leaves which are badly damaged, decayed or broken—leaving as much as possible. Pinch off the tips of any leaves showing tip-burn or worm-riddle, saving as much as possible of the leaf—unless the entire leaf should come off. Then place the head firmly on the table and slice a thin slice off the butt; take only enough to remove discoloration.



Fig. 17. Customers associate a head of cabbage stripped of all its outer leaves (at left) with "old" cabbage. Retaining as many of the good outer leaves as is practicable, and following the same freshening procedure used with lettuce, leaves the head with a desirable "new cabbage" appearance (at right).

As with lettuce, cabbage should also be dipped in cold water before being placed on the display. Do that either in the back room or at the display area. Cabbage is normally weighed before the water dipping and the price marks put on the butts for self service.

PRODUCE THAT APPEALS, SELLS

Remember, "vegetables properly prepared are more than half sold." Freshen your produce to give it eye-appeal and you enhance its "impulse value" to the customer. With vegetables on retail sale, *Eye-appeal means "Buy-appeal!"*