

## Embracing Wonky



Wonky, over-sized, under-sized and over-blemished - the fruits and vegetables that until recently, never made it down the supermarket aisle catwalk. Up to 40% of a crop of vegetables can go to waste because of the aesthetic requirements of supermarkets, but when, or, did we decide that beauty was more important than taste? Why are wonky vegetables even an issue? And are we as anti-wonky as retailers think? Wonky veg is increasing in demand and was even dubbed one of the growing food trends in 2017 and 2018. So, what's in it for Welsh growers?

## What's the reason for Wonky Veg?

Until 2009, there was often a misconception that any fruit or vegetables which did not look "perfect" could not be sold by retailers. But rules which came in to force in 2009 simplified how retailers could market produce without misleading consumers. So long as it is clean, free from pests or diseases, is not rotten, and is labelled with the country of origin, retailers are able to market it as they see fit<sup>1</sup>.

But almost 10 years later and with up to 40% of a crop of vegetables still going to waste because of the aesthetic requirements of supermarkets<sup>2</sup>, have we become too accustomed to the perfect vegetable? Where do supermarket aesthetic standards come from? Is it a result of our buying habits?

Research from analytics provider Blue Yonder suggests otherwise, who revealed last year, that 73% of shoppers are open to buying imperfect fruit and vegetables. Additionally, Blue Yonder has found that 90% of grocery retailers felt their customers would buy imperfect fruit or vegetables at a discount. Blue Yonder's survey asked 2000 consumers across the UK, US, France and Germany whether they would purchase wonky fruit and veg and found 81% of those shopping in the supermarket and at discount retailers would buy imperfect fruit and vegetables<sup>3</sup>.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/comply-with-marketing-standards-for-fresh-fruit-and-vegetables#specific-marketing-standard>
2. <https://www.wonkyvegboxes.co.uk/>
3. <https://www.newfoodmagazine.com/news/34349/consumers-fruit-vegetables-incentivise/>



Over the past few years, we have been waking up to the realities of food waste after it was revealed that the sector produces 10 million tonnes of food waste a year<sup>4</sup>. Celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall also helped to bring light to the issue, and have spurred on a change in consumer perception around food waste. We are now doing our bit to use more of the food we buy each week. *Between us, we're saving £3.4 billion a year compared with 2007, not to mention saving 5.0 million tonnes of CO2 – that's like taking 2.2 million cars off the road*<sup>5</sup>.

As a result, UK supermarkets, have now pledged to reduce food and drink waste by a fifth by 2025. This pledge is part of [The Courtauld Commitment](#), and as of November 2017, TyfuCymru are proud to be one of the signatories to the Courtauld Commitment 2025. WRAP is working with several Courtauld 2025 signatory supply chains to gather data and opinions from growers and suppliers. This will be used to refine best practice to be shared throughout the sector to leverage greater impact.

## Where are we now?

Two years ago, Asda became the first UK supermarket to trial 'wonky vegetables'. Customer research showed that 65% of Asda customers are open to the idea of wonky veg and 75% are drawn in by the significantly low price. Since then, they now deliver 20 boxes to 300 stores every Thursday, helping an additional 300 tonnes of misshapen veg make it on to our shelves. The response of the trial drove Asda to look again at all their produce specifications to allow more skin defects, funny shapes and sizes to make it through. They previously allowed 10% of carrots with cosmetic defects on to our shelves as part of the Grower's Selection range, but have increased this to 40% in May last year<sup>6</sup>.

*Asda says: Customers' buying habits and expectations of what their veg should look like have definitely changed since the boxes launched. People are very tuned into taste and shelf life when they think about quality, but are much more relaxed about the visual appearance of their fresh produce.*

Following in Asda's footsteps, Tesco has since launching a Perfectly Imperfect range of wonky fruit and veg<sup>7</sup>. Tesco says: "*Perfectly Imperfect apples have increased the amount of crop we can take to 97% (up from 87%), while our Perfectly Imperfect strawberries mean we can take 95% (up from 88%).*"

It's a similar story for Sainsburys and Morrisons. A spokesperson for Sainsburys commented: "*parsnips sold in our Basics range will have large, small, tapered and even 'wonky' veg in the bag.*"<sup>8</sup>

4. <http://www.wrap.org.uk/food-waste-reduction>

5. <https://www.lovefoodhatewaste.com/it-all-adds-up/>

6. <https://corporate.asda.com/blog/2018/03/28/how-our-wonky-veg-boxes-have-changed-what-youll-see-in-our-produce-aisles>

7. <https://www.tescopl.com/news/blogs/topics/expanding-our-perfectly-imperfect-wonky-fruit-range-tesco/>

8. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/home/topics/waste-not-want-not/is-the-wonky-veg-revolution-happening-at-last/539812.article>



Morrisons also pledged to sell more wonky, over-sized, under-sized and blemished seasonal fruit and vegetables after listening to customers' concerns about food waste. It has committed to increasing its range of seasonal wonky products by 50% to 33, including wonky kiwis and avocado. It is also launching its first frozen wonky product, a 1kg Wonky Berry Mix, and will advertise the products on television for the first time in an effort to boost their acceptability among consumers<sup>9</sup>.

## The rise of the ugly...what are the opportunities?

### Vegetable Boxes

Many vegetable box schemes have made an appearance over the last few years, and now wonky veg boxes are starting to emerge. According to a recent article in the Grocer, the vegetable box market is growing:

The UK organic market grew 6% in 2017, making it now worth a whopping £2.2bn, according to a report published by the Soil Association in February. Of this, home delivery organic sales, including box schemes, grew 9.5% last year, an impressive figure, especially when compared with the 4.2% growth in organic sales at the supermarkets (albeit from a larger baseline)<sup>10</sup>.

[Oddbox](#) became the first in London to start selling wonky fruit and vegetables in a box subscription. It has now partnered with 26 local growers and buys from further afield to buy the surplus stock from goods which have been rejected by supermarkets. The social enterprise saw sales increase by a whopping 900% last year<sup>11</sup>.

Wonky Veg Boxes are another company which deliver wonky fruit and veg boxes, they state that their end goal is not just to sell a lot of Wonky veg but to normalise the purchase and consumption of Wonky vegetables. They feel we should aim for a system in which vegetables are graded only by whether they are fit for human consumption or not.

### Changing perceptions

Did you know that wonky veg has been dubbed to be a food trend of the year both in 2017<sup>12</sup> and 2018? This demonstrates how much consumer perception is changing<sup>13</sup>.

Celebrities such as Jamie Oliver have helped by using television programmes such as the Channel 4 TV show, Friday Night Feast, to increase awareness of the problem and to change consumer perceptions.

9. <https://metro.co.uk/2018/04/04/morrisons-start-selling-wonky-veg-cheaper-price-cut-waste-7440967/>
10. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/channels/online/why-the-time-is-now-for-fresh-produce-box-companies/568456.article>
11. <https://www.virginstartup.org/how-to/oddbox-how-were-scaling-our-wonky-fruit-and-veg-delivery-business>
12. <http://www.mintel.com/press-centre/food-and-drink/mintel-announces-six-key-global-food-and-drink-trends-for-2017>
13. <https://www.getwestlondon.co.uk/whats-on/food-drink-news/top-food-trends-2018-including-14136735>





But its not just those with celebrity status playing their part. With the rise of social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, as a nation we enjoy sharing new and interesting images. Campaigner Jordan Figueiredo is using the power of these tools to drive a change in consumer perception and also as a platform to campaign to supermarkets to relax their rules around vegetable aesthetics.

With almost 85k twitter followers and over 40k instgram followers, he regularly posts images of wonky vegetables with humorous captions to his followers. On Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook the campaign has a monthly reach in the millions from over 150,000 followers in more than 190 countries around the world, and now has followers regularly looking for, and posting their own images of wonky vegetables. [The Ugly Fruit and Veg Campaign](#) has had some great successes and has helped wonky vegetables to become trendy content for social media<sup>14</sup>.

## When life gives you lemons...make lemonade

There is a growing market aimed at preventing huge amounts of misshapen food from being thrown away, and many producers are embracing this by including wonky vegetables in food and drink products.

Cardiff based, [Get Wonky](#) are one of those to join the market. They are on a mission to save wonky produce by supporting farmers who cannot sell their wonky produce anywhere else and make them in to delicious drinks that are free from any additives or gluten.

A new range of cold-pressed juices, using wonky fruit and vegetables that may otherwise have gone to waste, has also exclusively launched in Tesco. At £1.50 per 250ml bottle, the Waste Not range will undercut the cold press juice drink market and it is hoped that within the first 12 weeks of going on sale that they will save around 3.5 tonnes of surplus/waste fruit and vegetables<sup>15</sup>.

[Rubbies in the Rubbles](#) produce a range of award-winning relishes, ketchups and mayo sustainably, from ingredients that would otherwise go to waste, often for simply being the wrong shape, size or colour. To date they have saved, 4,344,479 fruits and vegetables<sup>16</sup>.

[The Wonky Food Company](#) is another example, they are working with farmers, suppliers and retailers to collect their imperfect and surplus fruit & veg and turn it into fabulous tasting products.

Meanwhile, Sainsburys have confirmed that they will be using 'ugly' fruit and veg in their products, for example in ready-prepared salads, the potato mash in ready meals or the filling in bakery products<sup>17</sup>.

14. <http://www.endfoodwaste.org/about.html>

15. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/01/new-juice-range-made-from-wonky-fruit-and-veg-aims-to-cut-waste>

16. <https://rubiesintherubble.com/> - 04.07.2018

17. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/home/topics/waste-not-want-not/wonky-veg-up-but-are-supermarkets-digging-deep-enough/558235.article>



## What have we learnt?

- Think about your marketing messages – can you influence your audience to embrace misshapen veg? Can they help you to spread the message? Use social media as a tool to generate conversation and content.
- Search for companies already using wonky veg in products, and get in touch to find out if they are looking for suppliers. Some of the producers mentioned above are open to hearing from new suppliers.
- If your misshapen fruit/veg can be used as ingredients in food or drink products, why not find local producers who aren't currently using wonky veg, but could, and can use your wonky products to make a strong statement to their customers about reducing food waste.
- Are there any current 'wonky veg box' providers which you can supply? Both [Oddbox](#) and [Wonky Veg Boxes](#) state on their website that they are always happy to be contacted by possible suppliers, so why not drop them a line?
- Think about pooling your resources – could you work with other Welsh growers to offer a wider selection of locally grown vegetables to potential customers? Or could you share logistics or input costs to set up your own 'wonky vegetable' box?
- Or how about donating your unwanted wonky veg? [FareShare](#) take good quality products including wonky veg, which is turned into delicious meals for people in need.

**If you're interested in working with other growers to collaborate in finding ways to use your surplus wonky veg, please email [tyfucymru@lantra.co.uk](mailto:tyfucymru@lantra.co.uk)**