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Building Better Veggies



Plant scientists are creating new vegetables that may prevent cancer, help you live longer—and even taste great.
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photographs by Todd Eberle

A group of scientists smack-dab in the middle of cattle country may be onto the most important development in food production in the past 50 years. Their laboratory is on the campus of Texas A&M University, long a friend and supporter of cattle ranchers and dairy farmers, and their revolutionary new product is a carrot. That's right. A carrot. The project includes an onion, too, but it's the carrot that has created all the excitement. Why? Because if it works as expected, this carrot may be the first in a long line of vegetables that have the potential to improve the health and life expectancy of people around the world. And that's no bull, according to the researchers (Texans talk that way).

Welcome to the brave new world of superfoods. No little tablets here. None of those strange-colored liquids you've seen served on *Star Trek*, either. No supplements, no protein powders, no mysterious minerals. The foods in this new world are fresh vegetables and fruits that pack a powerful nutritional wallop.

The new produce is popping up in labs across the country largely because of two relatively recent developments. First, nutrition researchers have established that free radicals, which are generated by the body as a by-product of metabolism, are in fact major players in many chronic diseases, including cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's and multiple sclerosis. These compounds promote oxidation, which destroys living cells and, in very general terms, is responsible for the aging process. It has also been established that antioxidants are the best antidote for free radicals.