



I spin fantasies of acquiring fame as the customer who prompts a revolution in food packaging.

Soggy produce dampens shopping experience

by Mary Ellen Collins

IF I WANTED TO shop in the rainforest, I'd move to Costa Rica. Instead, I battle our grocery store's insistence on creating a subtropical climate for the produce. My husband, John, and I shop there because we love the meat department, but we hate the rained-on fruits and vegetables.

After dodging the mist to grab a bunch of sodden carrots, John picks up a nearby customer feedback survey, scribbles his exasperation and puts his form in plain view in the designated spot. It remains there for weeks.

The slimy ginger pushes me over the edge, so I skip the form and choose the online customer service route. I explain that woody ginger root rots when it's wet. I add that we shouldn't have to dry each leaf of the prepackaged spinach so it will last longer than three days.

I receive an automatic "thank you for your feedback" response and a call from our store manager, Lisa, who thanks me and apologizes profusely, cites the store's commitment to exceeding expectations and says she'd love to meet me.

She promises a speedy relocation of the ginger and a readjustment of the misting schedule. But then she tries to convince me that the produce in the displays is still living and that watering helps keep it alive. I don't buy it, but I win a point when I say her theory can't possibly apply to vacuum-sealed products, too.

Horrified to hear that the packages contain water, Lisa says she has to consult colleagues in packaging, transportation, and display in order to address the problem. I ask if photographic evidence would help.

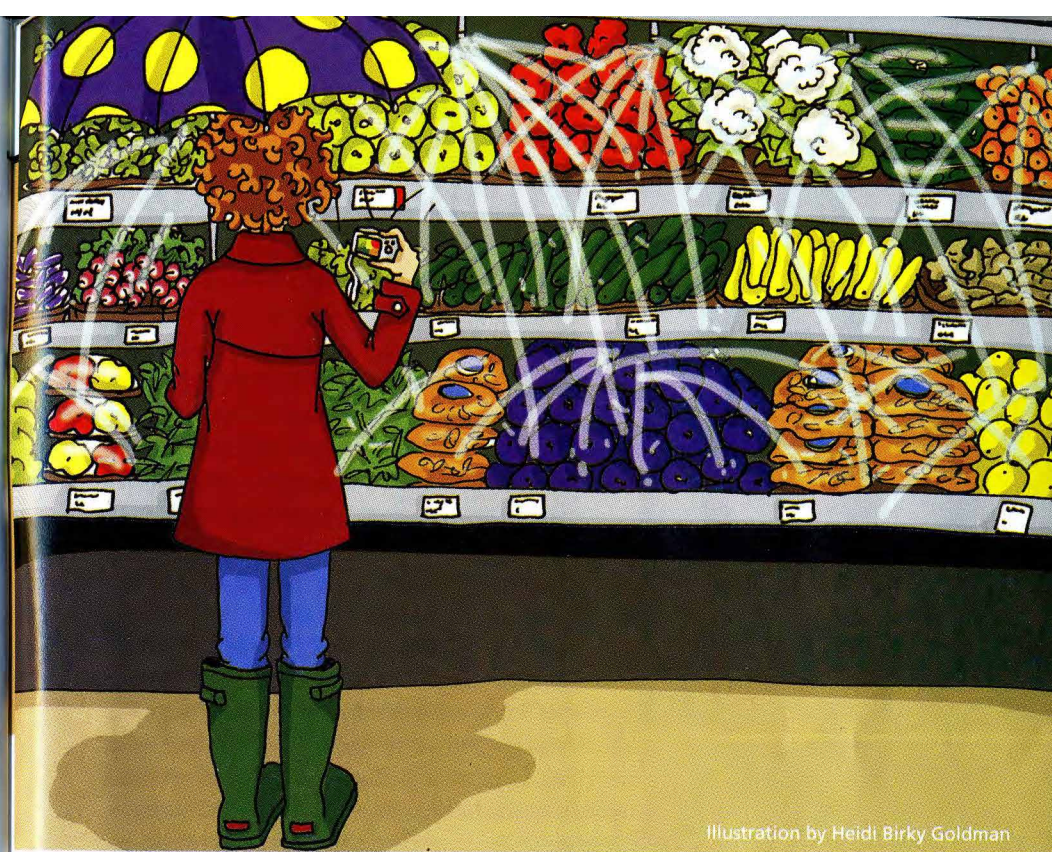


Illustration by Heidi Birky Goldman

"Oh Mrs. Collins, it's just so amazing that you care so much!" she says.

That fit of consumer cooperation ends up with us photographing our produce so John can capture the glistening, damp, fresh-from-the-package spinach and the puddles that dot the black Styrofoam pea pod package. We e-mail the pictures and monitor the store situation. The ginger root moves to an arid zone, but the rains continue everywhere else. And the bagged spinach still requires drying.

As I await Lisa's response, I spin fantasies of acquiring fame as the

customer who prompts a revolution in food packaging or a return to the days when we were happy to pluck our produce from unwatered displays. But I'm a realist. I expect a call, a heartfelt "thank you, but we're not changing our mode of operation," and perhaps a little token of appreciation — a personal meeting with Lisa, who will thank me again and hand me a roll of paper towels to enhance my experience in the produce aisle. ☐

Mary Ellen Collins is a freelance writer who lives in St. Petersburg, Fla., with her husband, John. When she's not writing about things that make her crazy, she reads, draws and frets about coming up with ideas for this column.