Docent lecture in horticultural science, with a specialisation in business administration by Sara Spendrup, Department of People and Society 2023-03-02

Fruit and vegetables – an appetite for sustainable food

Ongoing sustainability challenges calls for change and innovation. Old habits must be replaced or developed, and new systems and actions need to take place. Innovations at a multitude of levels are necessary, for example through development of new products, circular systems, and a greater diversity in or of production systems, such as urban cultivation and PFAL (Plant Factory with Artificial Lighting). Horticultural products: fruit, vegetables, and ornamental plants, play a crucial role in a sustainable society and are central elements of sustainable food systems. In this lecture I will focus on the role of the consumer and give examples on their beliefs and drivers for decision making when choosing food that supports the sustainability transition.

Understanding consumer behaviour and food choice is of great importance for stakeholders to facilitate more sustainable food choices. Although food choice is complex, it is important to try to explore underlying explanations to provide suggestions in how to enable consumers to change their food behaviour. Thus, we need to accept and understand the complexity of food choice and see consumers as social beings shaped by, among other things, the physical environment, social interactions, and culture. Several models of the consumer decision process have been suggested over the years and in the most simplified version a choice or purchase can be described as the result of a stimulus followed by a selection. Still, as it turns out, even though the stimuli are the same, different people make different choices. I will elaborate on some of these motives, preferences, cultural aspects, and underlying factors influencing food choices. Examples are linked to the protein shift, reducing animal protein and replacing it with plant-based meat alternatives and consumer attitudes towards plant breeding and the development of new products (fruit and vegetables).

My academic journey originates from horticultural science, a subject that integrates knowledge from biology, chemistry, design, economics and technology and various forms of systems analysis. My research focus has been on consumer behaviour, and the multi-disciplinary character of horticultural science mirrors how I have been working for the last years: a multi-disciplinary, applied research context with a systems approach. It is my aim to continue to work in similar research teams, and to develop the knowledge explaining consumer behaviour, drivers and inhibitors and food preferences, with a clear connection to horticulture and horticultural stakeholders.

To sum up, I aim to develop the subject through future interdisciplinary research projects with a clear connection to stakeholders within the horticultural industry. I strongly believe in the importance of understanding the consumer to successfully develop new products and/or the system. And to see the consumers as agents of change, and not just a “problem” in need of more information. I am also convinced that horticulture and horticultural science are key factors in implementing innovative and sustainable food production systems.