

## PLANT FOOD SAFETY ISSUES

*Michael P. Doyle*

*Center for Food Safety, University of Georgia*

### **Abstract**

Recent foodborne outbreak investigations have identified a variety of plant-based foods as newly recognized vehicles of foodborne illness, including bagged spinach, peanut butter, dried vegetable seasoning, carrot juice, and jalapeno peppers. In addition, fresh produce has become recognized as a leading vehicle of illnesses associated with foodborne outbreaks. Fresh-cut produce, which is cut, shredded, diced, or peeled, can pose an increased public health risk because this wounded plant tissue enables microbes to more easily attach and grow on the nutrients released from the plants. As an example, salsa has become an important vehicle of foodborne infections, with nearly 1 in 25 restaurant-associated foodborne outbreaks traced to salsa or guacamole. Current production and processing practices cannot be relied upon to ensure pathogen-free fresh and fresh-cut produce. A growing trend that contributes greatly to the risk of acquiring illness from plant-based foods and food ingredients is the importation of such materials, especially from countries that produce, process, or harvest food using insanitary practices. Recent outbreaks of salmonellosis associated with Asian-produced pepper used as a seasoning in foods illustrate this concern. Decreased water availability and increased salinity of irrigation water, increased land costs, and labor issues are factors that will likely contribute to a greater dependence on imported foods.