The Bill Moyers PBS show NOW got one important thing right about genetically-modified crops. "There's no scientific evidence that eating these ingredients hurts our health," says narrator Mark Schapiro in the segment "Seeds of Conflict," which aired earlier this month. Even Moyers' introduction muted the usual "Frankenstein foods" tone of such stories, contrasting "the surprises of nature" with "the precision of science."

The segment helpfully noted some of the practical, non-sinister reasons to engage in genetic engineering, as when introducing an agronomist who is trying to create corn that can immunize pigs (and someday people) against certain diseases: "Dr. Kan Wang isn't growing corn for food. She wants the corn to make medicine." While Schapiro's narration raises the familiar fear of "unforeseen reactions," it also notes that "Dr. Wang will test her corn vaccine for side effects. If the vaccine is safe for pigs, the same techniques could lead to better vaccines for people."

Nothing's perfect, so the segment still includes some vague fears from Dr. Ignacio Chapela, an assistant professor of ecosystem science from UC Berkeley, who says of the spread of transgenic corn: "I'm not going to die from that, you're not going to die from that. But we are thinking of intergenerational responsibility. How can we assure that our grandchildren will have a stable and reliable food source? I think we're playing with that." Chapela was co-author of a controversial report in Nature that suggested transgenic corn has unintentionally gotten mixed into the food supply in Mexico and went on to suggest that transgenes are migrating haphazardly around the corn genome, a claim that was debunked by several critics, leading Nature to note in a later issue that it was hasty in publishing the piece.

That controversy probably should have been described in greater detail in the broadcast but has at least been summarized [1] online by one of Moyers' associate producers, Keisha-Gaye Anderson [2] (who is apparently looking for a new gig, if anyone in TV land is hiring these days).

When all is said and done, the fact that the genetically-modified foods controversy keeps rolling along even without evidence of a human health threat is a reminder that fear of the unknown is enough to keep a safe product in the "controversial" file. Indeed, the Moyers piece repeatedly acknowledged that uncertainty about the future is the core argument against g.m. Perhaps, in the long-term, the only way to settle the "controversy" over g.m. crops is to answer a psychological question: How can people's fear of g.m. be decreased?

A recent Reuters Health report on ordinary (literally garden-variety) vegetables may provide a solution. Reuters reports that a Texas A&M University study found that children are less likely to reject or dislike vegetables if they have participated in raising vegetables. That diminishes the feeling that the vegetables are alien and increases curiosity about their taste, while fostering pride in successful crops. Perhaps if I'd helped Mom in the garden, it wouldn't have taken me until
adulthood to realize I like spinach and green beans. (Similarly, perhaps if my meat-eating friend Michael Malice had raised vegetables as a child, the adult Michael wouldn't have a Top Ten list of reasons to hate vegetables [3] on his website.)

Familiarity may breed contempt, but it also reduces fear. The next logical step for biotech boosters, then, may be to familiarize the young with the ways in which biotech already enhances their lives and will no doubt accomplish far more in the years to come. Opponents of biotech already have one strike against them in the psychological war: Since Americans have regularly been eating g.m. foods for some seven years now, the day will come when the dwindling ranks of anti-biotech protesters go to college campuses to drum up support and find that all the students they meet and try to recruit have been eating g.m. foods *their entire lives* without ill effect. The case for treating biotech as something scary and new will be much harder then. And the fearmongers will have to move on to some even newer target.

*For more, see ACSH's report on Biotechnology and Food [4].

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