

Changing Demographics Provide Opportunities for Small Vegetable Producers

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Ethnic markets have expanded at a rapid rate in recent years and represent an exciting opportunity for local farmers.

The percentage of immigrants in the United States is higher than it has been since 1930. Once here, many newcomers seek things that remind them of home. One of the most sought-after reminders is the taste of local dishes and meals enjoyed before immigrating. The power of food as a tie to home is evident in the consistent increase in the sales of ethnic vegetables.

Over the past few years, researchers at Rutgers, the University of Florida and the University of Massachusetts have conducted intensive surveys in major Northeast markets to quantify this changing market demand and to identify crops that are popular among four large ethnic groups that dominate the Eastern Seaboard: Chinese, Asian Indian, Puerto Rican and Mexican.

The last U.S. census, in 2000, found 2.7 million Puerto Ricans in the 16 East Coast states and the District of Columbia, a population that grew by 25 percent since the previous census in 1990. Though it's the largest of the four groups studied group, it wasn't the fastest-growing. There were 1.5 million Mexicans, 53 percent more than in 1990; almost 900,000 Chinese, 48 percent more; and 800,000 Indians, a population that rose by 106 percent.

Using interpreters and bilingual surveys, 271 people in each of the four ethnic groups were given choices of vegetables typically found in their community markets and considered potential candidates to grow on East Coast farms, to find how much they eat and what they're willing to spend.

Chinese selections included edamame, pak choy, oriental spinach, snow peas, oriental eggplant, edible luffa, baby pak choy, napa cabbage, perilla, oriental mustard and malabar spinach.

Asian Indians want things like eggplant, amaranth, bottle gourd, cluster beans, fenugreek leaves, mint leaves, mustard leaves, ridge gourd, white pumpkin and bitter gourd.

Mexicans prefer Anaheim pepper, calabaza, calabacita, chili jalapeno, chili poblano, chili serrano, chili habanero, cilantro and tomatillo.

Puerto Rican are seeking aji dulce, batata, calabaza, calabacita, chile caribe, cilantro, berenjena, pepinillo and verdolaga.

Market research showed that with many of these products, there's a very real shortage. This opportunity has expanded with the dramatic increase of transportation costs which has negatively impacted the importation of ethnic crops from other countries and other regions of the United States. In terms of quality and freshness, an item imported from India or China will be inferior to one grown locally.

Trials in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Florida have been conducted on research and commercial farms and have demonstrated that many of these promising crops can be easily grown by traditional farmers to meet the rising demand for year-round supplies of ethnic vegetables and herbs.

This market provides a potential niche for small growers looking for new opportunities.

On Aug. 1-2, 2009, the first Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference will be held at Osceola Heritage Park in Kissimmee. The event will feature exhibitors, educational sessions and more. All Florida farmers are invited to attend. Visit the conference Web site at <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>. For information on conference sponsorship or being an exhibitor, contact Bob Hochmuth, 386-362-1725 or bobhoch@ufl.edu.



Photo 1:

Pak choy, a Chinese vegetable, is one of many ethnic specialty crops that small farmers can grow in Florida to take advantage of niche markets created by the nation's rising immigrant populations. Photo by Gene McAvoy



Photo 2:

Long hot chilies await harvest at C&B Farms, a Clewiston, Fla., farm that primarily grows specialty vegetables. With the United States' immigrant population higher now than it's been since 1930, demand for ethnic vegetables is up, creating new opportunities for small farmers. Photo by Gene McAvoy