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Ethnic Vegetables: Hispanic

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Introduction

The term 'Hispanic' (or 'Latino') is generally used in the United States as a designation for Spanish speaking peoples originating from Mexico, Central America, South America, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. This culturally diverse group now represents the largest and fastest growing minority population in the U.S.

The Hispanic influence on American cuisine is particularly evident in Mexican, Tex-Mex, and similar cooking styles. Mexican food remains one of the most popular ethnic cuisines in the U.S., and ingredients introduced to the U.S. in Mexican cuisine are now used across many cuisines. Mexican entrées and ingredients can be found in major grocery chains, as well as dining establishments ranging from street food and fast food to fine dining. There is interest among consumers in purchasing the fresh, often unique, ingredients required for preparing ethnic dishes at home. Some of the more common vegetables and herbs used in Hispanic dishes, such as cilantro and jalapeño peppers, are already grown in Kentucky. Other traditional and specialty Hispanic crops can be produced and marketed here, both to Hispanics and non-Hispanics.

Marketing and Market Outlook

Consumers continue demanding a greater quantity and more variety of ethnic fruits, vegetables and herbs. The increase in demand is greater in populations in and around metropolitan areas. Many ethnic groups, including Hispanics, tend toward a relatively high per capita consumption of fresh produce. A greater emphasis on healthy foods and the desire for variety in the American diet, especially among younger consumers, also contribute to the increased demand for ethnic produce. Growth of Kentucky's Hispanic population, along with these other factors, presents an opportunity for local growers to expand or add ethnic Hispanic vegetables to the marketing mix.

HABANERO PEPPERS

Many Hispanics have a tradition of purchasing their food ingredients from open-air markets, which would seem to make farmers markets an ideal outlet for offering ethnic crops. Growers can also investigate adding traditionally Hispanic vegetables to roadside stand offerings. Restaurants, particularly those specializing in Mexican or vegetarian dishes, may be interested in purchasing fresh, locally grown ingredients. Hispanic products, along with other specialty or ethnic vegetables, could be added to a community supported agriculture (CSA) share. Growers may also try direct-marketing their products to ethnic grocers and neighborhoods in large cities.

The demand for ethnic vegetables is of-

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ten relatively small at any one time or place, so the market can easily become saturated. To guard against market saturation, growers can develop a special niche by supplying fresh, tender crops harvested at their peak, packaging them attractively, and choosing a variety of clients and markets.

Some of the challenges of marketing these vegetables to Hispanic customers include identifying the crops preferred by the target. Hispanic food preferences vary from country to country and region to region. For example, while some Latin American cultures primarily use black beans in their cooking, others prefer pinto beans, and still others predominantly cook with red beans. As with any new market, the best way to determine what to grow is to find out what the customer wants. Additionally, the same ingredient or crop may be identified by different Spanish names, depending on the specific region or country. An example is mandioca, which is also called manioc, yuca and cassava. Providing signage in Spanish will be important in attracting Hispanic buyers. First-hand knowledge of the culture, customs and language will be extremely valuable both in producing and marketing these products to this particular consumer base.

Non-Hispanic customers are also a potential market, especially consumer segments that are interested in preparing ethnic cuisines at home. Farmers markets and CSAs are great venues for introducing unusual fresh produce and value-added products. However, consumers unfamiliar with your selections may be more comfortable making a purchase when preparation instructions and/or recipes are provided. Supplying educational information about the crop's name, where and how it is grown, and other background information can also help promote unusual crops to people unfamiliar with the crop. Preparation and cooking demonstrations, including presentations with the farmer who grew the crop, can help generate seasonal and unusual product sales at grocery retailers.

Growers interested in producing any ethnic or specialty vegetable should always start small and test-market the crop before investing much time or money in production. Larger plantings should not be attempted unless the grower has an established market. To discover the market for a new crop like Hispanic vegetables, producers should first communicate with potential consumers to determine their preferences for products. Cultivating a local market for a new crop, such as an ethnic vegetable variety, often becomes a sort of partnership between the producer and his or her target consumer.

Roma Tomatoes

Production considerations

Potential crops

Currently the most common Kentucky-produced vegetables used in Hispanic cooking include hot peppers, corn, Roma tomatoes, winter and summer squashes, cilantro, sweet potatoes, and onions. Tomatillo, a tomato-like fruit that is the key ingredient in many salsas and chili sauces, has been marketed in Western and Central Kentucky. Dry beans are common in many Hispanic cultures, but it will be important to identify the specific type in demand by the target market.

A number of Hispanic crops belong to botanical families that are well-known to Kentucky growers, and include cucurbits, legumes and solanaceous plants. Some ethnic vegetables are merely a different subspecies or cultivar of crops commonly grown in North America. Cultural requirements for these closely related crops are often very similar to traditional vegetable crops. Nevertheless, growers may need to rely on their own on-farm trials to identify the best production methods for these specialty crops.

The crops listed in Table 1 (Pages 5-6) have been identified as popular ingredients in Hispanic cooking. These particular vegetables and herbs may have potential for production in Kentucky based on cultivation and hardiness information gleaned from the internet. Talking to potential Hispanic customers about the crops they would like to purchase could provide

additional ideas. Keep in mind that crops native to countries south of the U.S. border may not be hardy in Kentucky. Since local research data on many of the crops in Table 1 is lacking, growers should start small to determine which crops are suitable for their area. It is advisable to evaluate different cultivars and/or seed sources over multiple seasons and to test market the crops before attempting larger plantings.

Site selection and planting
In general, choose a site that is well-drained and warms up quickly in the spring. Avoid low-lying fields that are subject to late frosts and high humidity. Cold-sensitive crops should not be planted in an open field until all danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed sufficiently. Transplants can be grown in a greenhouse structure or hotbed, both for direct sales or on-farm use.

Some crops require a continuous supply of moisture, especially during fruit-set and development. UK research has reported greater yields, increased earliness, and a cleaner harvest when growing most vegetable crops on raised beds with black plastic mulch and drip irrigation. The moisture levels under the plastic must be carefully monitored when using this system.

Pest management
Disease and insect pressure for ethnic vegetables can vary depending on the crop, the cultivar, and the season. Chemical control methods may be limited because few pesticides are registered for many specialty crops. Integrated pest management (IPM) strategies, including frequent scouting to monitor pests, may be needed to prevent or reduce losses. Controlling weeds, sanitation, following a good rotation system, and the use of beneficial insects can aid in pest control.

Harvest and storage
Freshness is the key factor in marketing Hispanic vegetables; therefore, they should be harvested at their peak. Limiting the market radius to easy traveling distance will help ensure the freshest specialty produce.

Labor requirements
Many traditional Hispanic vegetables are produced using methods similar to comparable vegetables already grown in Kentucky. Producers can refer to Center for Crop Diversification crop profiles to estimate labor requirements for these specific vegetables. Plasticulture will add eight to 10 hours more per acre for the post-harvest removal and disposal of the plastic.

A producer often begins with small quantities of a new crop for a niche market. A small planting of these specialty vegetables can potentially be added to existing plots using similar cultural techniques. This could help minimize additional labor requirements.

Thinking carefully about how the specialty ethnic crop could fit into existing production systems can help minimize additional production expense and reduce risk. For example, specialty greens could be added at the end or alongside existing beds of greens, benefiting from similar weed and pest control methods. Starting with a smaller production area also keeps a grower from out-producing his or her market demand in the first year.

Economic considerations

Initial investments include land preparation and purchase of seed or transplants. Producers need to closely manage costs of key inputs, especially seed, when producing specialty vegetables. Seed for some ethnic vegetables can be more expensive, so purchasing a variety that does not meet a customer's preference can be a costly miscalculation. Additional costs are incurred with the installation of an irrigation system and plastic mulch.

In addition to potentially higher seed costs, producers may incur greater labor times and prices lower than comparable products. For example, the returns over total costs per 100-foot by 4-foot bed of Roma tomatoes will likely fall in the $200 range. With good management and direct marketing, returns from the same-sized bed of an heirloom tomato variety can approach $500. This is due to greater harvest times and (usually) lower prices for Roma tomatoes.

Pricing a new or specialty crop is also a key consideration. Producers should access available wholesale and retail market prices for Hispanic vegetables to determine what price the market can bear. Wholesale prices for many vegetables are reported daily or weekly through the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) in their Fruit and Vegetable Market News. Visiting Hispanic food stores or specialty retailers can also provide producers with an idea of what prices to ask for specialty crops.

An increase in Kentucky's Hispanic population, and interest in ethnic cuisine in general, offer Kentucky growers an opportunity to add production of Hispanic vegetables to their enterprises to tap into a growing market. Growers should start small to avoid over-saturating their market, and communicate with customers to make sure they understand which crops they prefer.

Selected Resources

- Vegetable Production Guide for Commercial Growers, ID-36 (University of Kentucky)
http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id36/id36.pdf
- WorldCrops for Northern United States (University of Massachusetts website with comprehensive listing of ethnic crops)
www.worldcrops.org
- Ethnic and Specialty Vegetables Handbook (Maryland Cooperative Extension, 2008)
https://extension.umd.edu/sites/default/files/_docs/EthnicVegHandbook2008.pdf
- Ethnic Vegetables. Cornell University Vegetable Program. http://cvp.cce.cornell.edu/crop.php?id=13
- Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook, 2nd edition (University of California, 1998)
Information on the handbook at: http://sfp.ucdavis.edu/pubs/publications/5/
Available for purchase at: http://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=3346

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Spanish translations in Table 1 provided by Rachel Rudolph

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Table 1. Selected Vegetables and Herbs that are Used in Hispanic Cooking and May Have Potential for Kentucky Production

Common Name	Botanical Name	Family Name	Parts Used/Eaten	Spanish Name	Alternate Names & Notes
Amaranth, vegetable	*Amaranthus gangeticus*	Amaranthaceae	Greens	amaranto	Also called leafy amaranth; cultivars grown for leaves instead of grain
Beans: Pinto, Red, and Black (Turtle)	*Phaseolus vulgaris*	Fabaceae	Dry seeds	frijol, poroto	
Beans: Yardlong	*Vigna unguiculata* subsp. *sesquipedalis*	Fabaceae	Pods, dry seeds	judía	
Cilantro	*Coriandrum sativum*	Apiaceae	Leaves	cilantro	Herb
Common purslane	*Portulaca oleracea*	Portulacaceae	Leaves	verdolaga	Cultivated varieties have a more upright growth habit
Corn (black sweet corn)	*Zea mays*	Poaceae	Fruit	elote	
Corn, flour	*Zea mays*	Poaceae	Fruit	maíz	Kernels are soft and starchier than other types; includes blue corn
Eggplant	*Solanum melongena*	Solanaceae	Fruit	berenjena	Some Hispanic groups prefer pink cultivars with white striations
Epazote	*Drysphania ambrosioides*	Amaranthaceae	Leaves	epazote	Highly invasive
Gherkin, cornichon	*Melothria scabra*	Cucurbitaceae	Fruit	pepinillo	Also called Mexican sour pickle
Hot peppers	*Capsicum annuum*	Solanaceae	Fruit	ají (very small hot peppers only)	e.g. Chilaca, Chili, Chile de arbol, Guajillo, Habanero, Jalapeño, Poblano, Serrano
Huauzontle (pronounced wau'sontle)	*Chenopodium nuttaliae; C. berlandieri sub sp. nuttaliae*	Amaranthaceae	Leaves; seed heads	huauzontle	Also called Aztec spinach
Mexican coriander	*Eryngium foetidum*	Apiaceae	Leaves	culantro	Herb; may need to start in a greenhouse
Mexican tarragon	*Tagetes lucida*	Asteraceae	Leaves & flowers	pericón	
Okra	*Abelmoschus esculentus*	Malvales	Fruit	quingombó	
Onions	*Allium cepa*	Alliaceae	Bulb	cebolla	
Pápalo	*Porophyllum ruderale*	Asteraceae	Leaves	yerba porosa	Very frost sensitive
Peanuts	*Arachis hypogena*	Fabaceae	Seed	maní	
Squash blossoms	*Cucurbita spp.*	Cucurbitaceae	Flowers	flores de calabacitas	
Stevia	*Stevia rebaudiana*	Asteraceae	Leaves	stevia	Also called sweet leaf; a sweetener native to South America
Summer squash	*Cucurbita pepo*	Cucurbitaceae	Fruit	calabacita, calabacín	Also grey squash; a summer squash similar to zucchini

Sweet potato	*Ipomea batatas*	Convolvulaceae	Root	batata	Particularly white fleshed/dry fleshed cultivars
Tomatillo	*Physalis ixocarpa*	Solanaceae	Fruit	tomatillo	Also called husk tomato
Tomato, Roma	*Lycopersicum esculentum*	Solanaceae	Fruit	tomate	Preferred for their meatier texture and lower water content
Winter squash, pumpkin	*Cucurbita moschata*	Cucurbitaceae	Fruit	calabaza	Hard shelled winter squash