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. Every year thousands of people immigrate to the United States from their native countries. Once here, many seek the 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.

The immigrant population in the United States has been rising in recent years. The percentage of immigrants in the United States is higher than it has been since 1930 and it is estimated by mid-century white Americans could be a minority.

Over the past few years, researchers at Rutgers, University of Florida, and 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 Census found 2.7 million Puerto Ricans in the 16 East Coast states and the District of Columbia, a population that grew by 25 percent during the 1990s. While it’s the largest 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 Asian Indians, a population that has risen by 106 percent in 10 years.

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

Market research showed that with a lot 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 conducted on research and commercial farms have demonstrated that many of these promising crops can be easily grown by traditional growers to meet the growing demand for year round supplies of ethnic vegetables and herbs.

This growing market provides a potential niche for large and small growers looking for new markets.

For more information, contact Gene McAvoy, Regional Vegetable Extension Agent IV with the UF/IFAS Hendry County Extension Office at gmcavoy@ifas.ufl.edu.

Even the US Dept of Defense is getting in on the ethnic produce act. Here is a link to a web based power point produced by the DOD/DSCP. There may be some opportunities for Florida growers here - DSCP stands for Defense Supply Center Philadelphia. Produce procurement for the US Military is headquartered there and now they are looking for ethnic crops! - GM
Pak Choi ready for market, C&B Farms - Gene McAvoy.
Bitter Gourd, C&B Farms - Gene McAvoy.
Long hot chilies ready for harvest, C&B farms - Gene McAvoy.
Snow pea tips, C&B Farms - Gene McAvoy.