

Market for ethnic vegetables grows

Farmers see change in consumer base

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(AP PHOTO)

Albert O. Ayeni, an agronomist at Cook College of Rutgers University, shops for hot peppers Thursday at the Garden State Farm Market in North Brunswick. Ayeni, of Nigeria, coordinates a program at the university to help East Coast growers capitalize on the growing market for ethnic vegetables.

NEW BRUNSWICK — Formisano Farms in South Jersey began growing ethnic vegetables more than 20 years ago, starting with the herb cilantro.

A staple in several ethnic communities, cilantro is on its way to becoming mainstream. It's a key ingredient in salsa, which has surpassed ketchup sales, and now makes up 10 percent of the farm's income.

The explosion of immigrant populations is fueling the growth of ethnic vegetables like cilantro and bok choy, giving farmers new, and potentially more profitable, revenue streams to add to their American staples of corn, sweet peppers and tomatoes. They'll have less competition for this narrow niche, crops that an ethnic population would have consumed in their home country, now growing in small quantities in the United States.

"Cilantro is widely used almost everywhere today," said John Formisano, whose family has been farming for nearly a century. "When we first started, most people hadn't ever heard of it."

Today, the American public may not recognize Chinese eggplant's long, slender purple shape, or aji dulce — small, colorful sweet peppers — two vegetables commonly used in Asian and Hispanic cooking.

But farmers have recognized demographic trends that show a change in the consumer base, said Bill Sciarappa, a Rutgers agricultural extension agent with a Ph.D. in economic entomology and agricultural pest management.

"Today's niche market is the future mainstream market," he said.

Farmers are expanding their product line, using familiar growing techniques to transition from parsley to cilantro, standard Italian eggplant to Chinese eggplant, peas to edamame beans, Sciarappa said. He is part of a team at Rutgers University developing a comprehensive production and marketing plan for ethnic vegetables to help East Coast growers.

"That's what gave me the idea 20 years ago when I saw farmers switch over to cilantro from parsley," he said. "It was the same growth pattern, same planting culture, same harvest procedures, but you got twice the money then. We see the cycle repeated over and over again."

It can be even more profitable, depending on market conditions. Farmers sell eggplant on average for \$10 per box, while ethnic eggplants — Japanese, Chinese, Indian — can sell for \$30 per box, he said.

Farmers are getting help from agricultural experts at Rutgers, using a market-driven approach determined by census data, economic forecasting and bilingual surveys of consumers.

The plan is to create a blueprint that would develop a market along the East Coast — including Connecticut, New Jersey, Florida and Georgia — to link growers with ethnic markets.

Farmers would produce potentially more profitable vegetables such as bok choy, tomatillos and bitter melon that can be successfully grown in their own local markets. Gourmet consumers and specialty food stores also are interested in ethnic produce.

Economists are measuring the demands carefully so farmers won't glut the market and make these potentially premium crops lose their value.