

Marketing Publications

Options

for Massachusetts Farmers and Producers

Diversifying Crops for a Changing Farmers' Market

The ethnic makeup of Massachusetts has become more diverse over the past decade. The United States Census lists the total population in the state as 6,016,425 as of 1990. Since 1980 the number of Blacks has increased from 221,279 to 297,006, Hispanics from 141,043 to 275,859, and Asians and Pacific Islanders from 49,501 to 140,745.

Each group brings its unique culture, incorporating their language, customs and food preferences into their new home. Many settle in urban locations, where they are potential customers of farmers' markets. However, the traditional American fruit and vegetable varieties grown here may not always be the most popular items with these new shoppers. With proper planning, and by familiarity with the food preferences of the populations who live near the farmers' market, you can diversify your product base and successfully attract these new customers to the farmers' market.

One grower who attends several farmers' markets in eastern Massachusetts learned the preferences of her customers by asking them. "My first year at the markets I asked the customers what they would like to see there. I then researched those items I was unfamiliar with, and if possible, grew them the following year." Some of the items grown are lemongrass, garlic, and red onions, popular with the Southeast Asian population, and hot peppers and cilantro, which are popular with the Hispanic population. "I have found that many of the ethnic vegetables are popular with other shoppers as well. People are going out to restaurants where they are served specialty items like red cabbage and when they see them at the farmers' market, they buy them to try at home."

Here are some tips to help you decide what fruits and vegetables to bring to a particular farmers' market.

Before deciding to sell at a particular farmers' market:

- Contact the market manager. Ask him/her who shops at the market? What is the ethnic makeup of the market? What are some of the more popular items that sell at that market? What is in short supply?
- Visit the farmers' market (preferably the year before you wish to begin selling there). Try and get a feel for the market. What are the other farmers selling? What are the shoppers buying? What are they not buying? What commodities is there an abundance of? What is missing?
- Contact the local WIC office near the farmers' market. This is a great resource for information about the food preferences of shoppers who receive farmers' market coupons. The Department of Food and Agriculture can provide the phone number of the local WIC office.
- Contact Cooperative Extension for technical assistance on growing specific vegetables. In Eastern Massachusetts, contact Alden Miller at 617-891-0650. In Western Massachusetts, contact John Howell at 413-545-5307.

At the market:

- Get feedback from your customers. Ask them what they would like to see at the market.
- Offer preparation ideas and recipes, especially for unfamiliar fruits and vegetables. Offer samples. Sponsor a cooking demonstration or festival around a particular crop.

- While most consumers have their own likes and dislikes, some generalizations can be made regarding fruit and vegetable preferences of particular ethnic groups. Following are some of the commonly used fruits and vegetables for several groups. This can be a general guide, but of course the best information comes from your own customers.

Chinese

- Fruit - apples, grapes, peaches, watermelon
- Vegetables - amaranth, asparagus, bean sprouts, bok choy, broccoli, cabbage (Chinese and napa), cauliflower, celery, Chinese long beans and mustard, chrysanthemum greens, cucumbers, eggplant, flat beans, garlic, ginger root, green peppers, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce, mushrooms, mustard root, okra, onions (yellow, scallions, shallots), parsnip, peas, potato, pumpkin, snow peas, spinach, squashes, tomatoes, turnips, watercress, wax beans, yams.

South East Asians (Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotian)

- Fruit - apples, cantaloupe peaches, pears, plums, strawberries, watermelon
- Vegetables - artichokes, asparagus, beans (long and string) broccoli, (Chinese and domestic) cabbage (domestic, Chinese, savoy, and napa), calabash, carrot, cauliflower, celery, (domestic and Chinese) Chinese chard, chinese radish, chrysanthemum, corn, cucumber, eggplant (domestic and Thai), leeks, lotus root, mushrooms, mustard (chinese greens), okra (domestic and lady finger), peas, peppers, potato, pumpkin (flowers and leaves), spinach (Chinese, Indian, domestic), squash, sweet potatoes (tubers, leaves), tomatoes, turnips, wax gourd, winged beans, yams
- Herbs (mint, dill, fresh coriander), fresh chili peppers, ginger

African Americans

- Fruit - apples, berries, peaches, watermelon
- Vegetables - beets, broccoli, cabbage, corn, greens (chard, collard, kale, mustard, turnip), green peas, okra, potatoes, spinach, squash, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, yams

Mexicans

- Fruit - strawberries
- Vegetables - chilis, corn, onions. peas, potatoes, squashes (pumpkin, summer), squash blossoms, tomatoes

Caribbean Islanders (Bahamas, Greater Antilles, Lesser Antilles, Jamaica, Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico)

- Fruit - gooseberries
- Vegetables - broccoli, cabbage, callaloo (malanga or taro leaves), chilis, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, green beans, lettuce, okra, onions, peppers, potatoes, radishes, spinach, squashes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, yams

RESOURCES

Food and Culture in America, A Nutrition Handbook, Pamela Goyan and Kathryn Sucher, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1989. Lists commonly used foods of several ethnic groups.

Specialty Vegetables: A Small-Scale Alternative, George Halcomb, USDA Office of Information. Tips on growing ethnic and specialty vegetables.

The Complete Asian Cookbook, Charmaine Solomon, McGraw-Hill, 1976. A guide to Asian cooking.

Many cookbooks like the one listed above feature recipes for different styles of cooking. They are a good source for learning about some of the commonly used ingredients. Check at your local library.

Census Data. The Boston Public Library can provide you with this information for cities and towns across the state. Call 617-536-5400.

YOUR CUSTOMERS! Ask them what they would like at the market.