

## **Buyers and Sellers' Responses to Ethnic and Specialty Produce in the Baltimore-Washington Area**

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### **Introduction**

In February 2002 Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) established a two-year specialty crops initiative. MDA initiative encompasses nine projects implemented by the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension (MCE) and commercial agricultural professionals in the areas of specialty crops production, marketing and education. These nine projects range from specialty vegetables and fruits production trials and marketing (i.e., leafy oriental vegetables, high-tunnel greenhouse for cut flowers, beach plumbs, table/wine grapes, high-tunnel organic salads, asparagus, strawberries) to special seminars on aquaculture and workshops on organic products.

The objectives of MDA specialty crops initiative are threefold: (1) test the potential for growing specialty crops under diverse Maryland environments; (2) evaluate specialty crops market potential in the state; (3) and provide valuable production and marketing guidelines to producers, retailers, wholesalers, and agricultural professionals.

The “Buyers and Sellers’ Responses to Ethnic and Specialty Produce in the Baltimore-Washington Area (BWA)” study is a component of the MDA specialty initiative seeking to (1) identify potential growers, sellers and buyers of ethnic and specialty vegetables in BWA, (2) identify ethnic and specialty vegetables produced, and sold in BWA, and (3) develop a list of ethnic and specialty produce as well as a production and marketing network for producers, sellers, and buyers of ethnic and specialty produce in the region.

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## Data and Methods

Data were collected through interviews using Duncan and Kalton's single-time surveys. Six separate questionnaires were developed for each category of the interviewees. Interviewed individuals were 10 consumers, 65 commercial sellers and buyers, 25 farmers' market buyers, 25 farmers' market sellers, and 10 growers of ethnic and specialty vegetables. TSP econometric computer package will be used to compute and analyze data.

## Preliminary Results

This study of ethnic and specialty vegetable markets is still being conducted. Preliminary findings on commercial sellers and buyers, farmers' market buyers, and potential growers of ethnic and specialty vegetables are being reported below.

### *Commercial Sellers*

Table 1 describes responses of commercial sellers (i.e., international food store, and chain food store managers) about selling ethnic and specialty vegetables. Commercial sellers of ethnic and specialty vegetables reported that they buy produce in bulk from regional distributors, local farmers, and imports and resell them directly to consumers. Locally produced ethnic and specialty vegetables are preferred due to their outstanding quality and freshness but their volume was not large enough to satisfy the BWA demand. Most sold ethnic and specialty vegetables at the international stores and chain food stores were cilantro, specialty herbs, Thai eggplants, hot peppers, sweet potato leaf, and amaranths.

**Table 1. Commercial Sellers' Responses to Ethnic and Specialty Vegetables**

<b>Market Operations</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Business type	International food stores, and chain food stores
Main operation	Buy in bulk and resell to consumers
Most sold vegetables	Cilantro, specialty herbs, Thai eggplants, hot peppers, sweet potato leaf, and amaranths
Source of supply	Regional distributors, local farmers, and imports
Marketing strategies	Delivery and direct sales
Average gross sales per week	\$5,000.00
Locally produced vegetables preference	Buy local produce for better quality and freshness but not enough to satisfy BWA demand (for ethnic and specialty vegetables)
Specialty vegetables network	Useful for growers, sellers, and buyers of specialty vegetables (for networking)

### *Commercial Buyers*

Interviewed commercial buyers of ethnic and specialty vegetables were mainly restaurant chiefs and international food store managers (Table 2). Commercial buyers, such as restaurants bought significant amounts of specialty vegetables from local farmers and wholesalers through special delivery and direct sales. Restaurant chiefs spent on average \$2,500.00 per week to purchase ethnic and specialty vegetables. It was suggested that local ethnic farmers' markets could be an alternative source of ethnic and specialty vegetables.

**Table 2. Commercial Buyers' Responses to Ethnic and Specialty Vegetables**

<b>Market Operations</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Business type	International food stores, and chain food stores, and restaurants
Main operation	Buy in bulk and resell to consumers, and/or buy to cook for clients
Most purchased vegetables	Cilantro, specialty herbs (basil, mint), hot peppers, and ginger
Source of supply	Wholesalers, local farmers, international food stores, and imports
Marketing strategies	Delivery and direct sales
Average purchases per week	\$2,500.00 (i.e., mainly restaurants)
Locally produced vegetables preference	Buy local produce for better quality and freshness but not enough to satisfy BWA demand
Specialty vegetables network	Useful for specialty vegetable growers, sellers, and buyers' networking
Local ethnic farmers' markets	Establish a local ethnic farmers' market open at least once a week

### *Farmers' Market Buyers*

Farmers' markets have become a significant source of locally grown produce in Maryland and across the U.S. Nevertheless, none of these Maryland farmers' markets exclusively sells ethnic and specialty vegetables. For this study, five farmers' markets were randomly selected in the Baltimore-Washington corridor. Five buyers were interviewed at each farmers' market. When asked about most purchased ethnic and specialty vegetables at the farmers' markets, buyers replied that cilantro, eggplants, and hot peppers were the most purchased vegetables (Table 3). Most farmers' market buyers shop once or twice a week and spent on average \$30 weekly. They shop at the farmers' markets not only for the freshness and quality of the produce but also for recreational purpose. However, farmers' market shoppers would not change their shopping habits if farmers' markets were open several days during the week.

**Table 3. Farmers' Market Buyers' Responses to Ethnic and Specialty Vegetables**

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Most purchased vegetables?	Cilantro, specialty herbs, hot peppers, and eggplants
Number of farmers' markets visited per season?	1 farmers' market on average
Number of visits at farmers' markets per season?	1-2 visits per week
Weekly purchased quantity?	1 pint per vegetable
Average purchases per week?	\$20-50
Reasons for shopping at farmers' markets?	Better quality and freshness but also for fun and enjoy good outdoor time
Attitude toward additional market days?	Additional days would not affect shopping patterns
Specialty vegetables network?	Useful for specialty vegetable growers, sellers, and buyers to network

***Potential Growers***

Ten ethnic and specialty vegetable growers were interviewed. Growers' production and marketing patterns tended to match their ethnic background. For instance, farmers of African origins were inclined to grow ethnic and specialty vegetables traditionally eaten by Africans and therefore supplying African stores and restaurants. The same observation applies to other ethnic groups such as Caribbean, Latino, and Hispanic. Table 4 indicates that most grown ethnic and specialty vegetables were specialty herbs, eggplants, hot peppers, sweet potato leaf, bitter leaf, tomatillo and amaranths. Ethnic vegetable growers sold their produce to restaurants and international food stores. Direct sales and pick-your-own were the most used marketing strategies. Joining a network of vegetable growers, sellers, and buyers, and/or a farm cooperative could significantly benefit ethnic vegetable growers.

**Table 4. Growers' Responses to Ethnic and Specialty Vegetables**

<b>Growers Characteristics</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Growers experience	Some exposure to ethnic and specialty vegetables
Most grown vegetables	Specialty herbs, eggplants, hot peppers, sweet potato leaf, bitter leaf, and amaranths
Market outlets	International food stores, and restaurants
Marketing strategies	Delivery, direct sales, and pick-your-own
Specialty vegetables network	Useful for growers, sellers, and buyers of specialty vegetables (for networking)
Joining a small farm cooperative	Would be beneficial to growers

## **Concluding Remarks**

The University of Maryland Cooperative Extension has been experimenting ethnic and specialty vegetables in Maryland since 2000 (S.L. Tubene, R.D. Myers, and C. Pergerson). Three aspects of the research were to (1) evaluate ethnic and specialty vegetable markets in Maryland, (2) explore production possibilities of ethnic produce and their adoption in the region by designing and implementing pilot projects and on-farm research, and (3) introduce ethnic food to Marylanders and educate them about the nutritional value of ethnic and specialty produce. Results of the ethnic and specialty vegetable trials revealed consistent and sufficient quality and quantity of ethnic vegetables. As more trials are being conducted for several other specialty crops including oriental leafy vegetables, beach plums, table and wine grapes, hybrid-bramble, and hardy kiwi; production guidelines will be published and provided to ethnic vegetable growers. Similarly, marketing research projects will help facilitate networking among ethnic and specialty vegetable growers, sellers, and buyers. More educational programs are still needed in the areas of marketing, production and nutritional awareness to ensure a better understanding and promotion of these unusual crops. Once completed, final findings of this marketing project will be available to the public.