

Vegetables in the East

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New Jersey vegetable growers produce more than 100 different vegetable crops annually. Increasingly, many of these are specialty, high-value Vegetable crops grown on a very limited acreage, with a market that is easily saturated. Established growers looking for greater diversification and new growers looking for a previously unfilled market niche are most likely to produce these new crops (Ferretti and Orzolek, 1988; Kline, 1986). Unfortunately, there are many problems that they will encounter before there is any hope of achieving success.

Problems that the specialty vegetable grower is likely to experience include: 1) markets that are easily saturated with even a few additional acres of production; 2) production methods that may rely greatly on expensive hand labor; 3) a lack of registered chemicals for pest control; 4) little experience with or knowledge of the postharvest management needed for their crops; 5) dealing with non-traditional marketing outlets; 6) lack of a single comprehensive handbook on specialty vegetable production that would include variety, cultural, pest control, marketing, and handling recommendations

A lack of traditional information sources has led extension workers to develop innovative teaching techniques, as well as to rely on old standards. Perhaps the most widely used is the demonstration plot, where hundreds of vegetables are showcased at grower field days and twilight meetings. One advantage of this method is the ability to exhibit a large variety of items side-by-side in a small area. Unfortunately, with a diverse grouping of plants, little information is gained by the extension worker beyond variety recognition and the extremes of what will and will not grow in the area. Limited cultural, fertility, pest information, or marketability data are obtained. Nonetheless, this may be a good starting point for those in states lacking specialty Vegetable production.

Another option for the extension worker is to choose only a few specialty Vegetable crops and thoroughly research their culture. The advantage to this method is that much more information will be attained than by looking at a wide variety of crops. A disadvantage, however, is that in-depth information on only a couple of crops could lead to over promotion of the crop. This results in a decline

in the price and the disappearance of what previously had been a solid market. In addition, if studies are conducted at research farms, information on the marketability of the crops may not be available.

In New Jersey, we have had success focusing on single crops. A grower in northern New Jersey was selling specialty potatoes with unique flesh and skin colors at markets in New York City. The prices he received were five to 10 times higher than those received for traditional potatoes. In 1989, a trial was conducted at the growers farm comparing more than 20 specialty potatoes. The trial succeeded for a number of reasons. The cultural requirements and pest problems are similar for most potatoes. The grower was able to supply us with information on the marketability of the crop. The state potato specialist was able to generate information on yield, specific gravity, and size from a replicated trial. The grower presented the data himself at the annual New Jersey Vegetable Growers meeting, with more than 200 people in attendance. This trial accomplished its objectives, because of the willingness of a grower who was secure enough in his own markets to share his knowledge. The following year, a few more growers tried these varieties with some success. A similar trial involving beefsteak and heirloom tomato varieties was conducted with equally good results.

Perhaps the most productive meeting on specialty Vegetables occurred in a session of the 1989 Annual Meeting of the Vegetable Growers Assn. of New Jersey. New Jersey agricultural agent Richard W. VanVranken has coined the term "designer Vegetable" for referring to specialty crops. The media was impressed with this term, and numerous print, radio, and television stories referred to this label and its potential to benefit the New Jersey grower. Also present at the meeting was a grower panel, explaining their experiences in the market, and a retailer who defined the products he would like to see grown and marketed.

Another very important guideline was presented at that particular meeting. In many cases, by the time cooperative extension has enough reliable, replicated data on a particular specialty crop, it may no longer be a very small and profitable niche. Growers and extension personnel need to foresee what crops may be in demand over the next few years. Looking over gourmet magazines that highlight the latest trends in food preparation is an excellent source of potential new crop information. These nontraditional information sources may be useful when dealing with nontraditional crops.

As mentioned earlier, there is no single written source for specific information on growing specialtyvegetables. Helpful publications include, the *Manual of Minor Vegetables* (Stephens, 1988) and the *Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook* (Myers, 1991). These publications are especially useful in referencing all of the common names, which can lead to confusion when trying to identify

some of these crops. Unfortunately, these texts do not offer growers in the eastern United States much in the way of culture and pest information applicable to their climates. In addition to these publications, some seed catalogs that deal in specialty Vegetables are excellent resources for the extension worker.

At present, work is being completed in New Jersey on a reference that should aid the eastern U.S. specialty Vegetable grower. The *Mid-Atlantic Specialty Vegetable Guide* will be a five-state (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia) cooperative effort, and the first comprehensive source of production recommendations for growers. The book will include chapters on oriental vegetables, specialty lettuce, salad, garnish, and cooking greens, legumes, onion types, and many others. Each reference will include the common and scientific names, variety recommendations, general culture, pest control, harvest and handling methods, marketing options, and uses. The publication is a result of the demand for regional specialty vegetable information in one source. The expected date of publication is mid-1993. The book will be updated every other year and, we hope, will fill the void in specialty vegetable literature for the eastern United States.

Educating growers on specialty vegetables is a challenging endeavor. Generating interest and excitement is usually the easiest part, and the extension worker needs to be careful not to oversell any particular crop. Markets are saturated easily and growers need to research the marketing side of any specialty crops venture thoroughly.

Literature Cited

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