Ethnic Crop Production: An Overview and Implications for Missouri

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The farm crisis of the 1980s has taken its toll on Missouri farmers. A recent survey (Spencer, 1989) revealed that >2700 small farm operations in Missouri declared bankruptcy between 1981-82. A similar trend has occurred in several southern states (Estes, 1989). Minimal information on alternative enterprises, reluctance to diversify, and insufficient business management skills are some of the reasons most often cited as obstacles facing these farmers (Francis, 1988). Overconcentration in a few major crops makes farmers vulnerable to policy changes that negatively affect farm prices. To maintain economic profitability, limited-resource farmers in Missouri must diversify their production. The use of exotic (specialty, ethnic) vegetables designated for specific groups is one venture that holds promise in Missouri. This paper reviews some of the important considerations to be made by horticulturists before large-scale production of alternative crops and also will note some of the attempts to introduce ethnic crops in Missouri. Growers must consider market potential, competition, available production information, and economic potential of these crops.

MAJOR MARKETS

The number of legal immigrants from some Asian, Caribbean, and Latin American countries continues to be formidable (Table 1). However, these numbers reflect only legal immigrants and do not include the many illegal immigrants entering the United States daily. Therefore, these numbers underestimate the true buying potential...
of the ethnic population living in the United States. In 1985, the Produce Marketing Assn. estimated the business generated by specialty crops to be more than $100 million/year (Crunkleton, 1985). The 1988 specialty vegetable import figures (USDA-ERS) indicate a 12% average increase from 1987 for specialty imports (Greene, 1989a).

Ethnic vegetables are in increasing demand by immigrants and domestic Americans alike (Table 2). The per capita consumption of fruits and vegetables in the United States increased by 12% between 1972 and 1987 (Greene, 1989b). There is a high demand for ethnic vegetables in larger cities such as Chicago, Miami, New York, and Atlanta where there are large ethnic populations (Greene, 1989a). Increased immigrant populations in St. Louis, Kansas City, Memphis, St. Paul, and Minneapolis have also contributed to increased sales of exotic vegetables by specialty food shops in these areas (Greene and Hamm, 1988). Ethnic groups from the Pacific Basin, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America who reside in these cities demand foods of their native lands and in so doing, introduced the domestic American public to the culinary uses of vegetables such as chayote (Sechium edule Jacq., SW.) and calabaza (Cucurbita moschata Duch ex Lam.). Two of the cities mentioned above are in Missouri and are located within a 24-h drive of several of these other major markets for exotic vegetables. Thus, Missouri is strategically located to compete with other states producing ethnic vegetables.

Yam ( Dioscorea alata L.), calabaza, and hot pepper ‘Scotch Bonnet’ (Capsicum frutescens L.) are being researched in Missouri and offer an alternative to traditional crops (Marsh and Rhoden, 1989). Most of the yams consumed in the United States are imported from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. While some calabaza and ‘Scotch Bonnet’ are grown in Florida, the vast majority of these crops are imported from Jamaica, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic.

Shops selling exotic vegetables obtain their produce from New York, Miami, and California. The markets that are potential customers for Missouri’s exotic vegetables currently receive these products through suppliers located in Miami and New York. These vegetables are then shipped to the local stores, which place additional markups on each item before its sale to the consumer.

**PROBLEMS FACING PRODUCERS OF ETHNIC CROPS**

**Countries exporting to the United States**

With the advent of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), producers from countries included in this act have the potential to penetrate the United States ethnic crop market with greater ease and no import duties. However, most CBI countries have not been able to take advantage of this act because of poor infrastructure for vegetable crop production and marketing (VanSickle, 1989). Several problems related to ethnic crops exist among producers, brokers, and government officials in the exporting countries. These include limited markets for second quality after a very strict grading system, lack of punctuality by brokers, thereby resulting in excessive spoilage, lack of knowledge of postharvest handling and storage, scarcity of registered chemicals for use on ethnic crops, and high transportation cost. The problems facing export brokers are inability to fill required quotas for required vegetables, high cost of transportation, and delays in customs clearance. Government officials view the main problems facing the industry to be lack of capital investment to increase hectarage in ethnic crops, lack of research data on the husbandry of these crops, sometimes lower prices for exports than farm gate prices for second quality, and unsatisfactory conditions of access roads to farms.

**United States producers**

Estes (1989) suggested that the underlying factor that controls successful sales of ethnic crops is a predetermined marketing plan. Growers of specialty crops should be familiar with the total system from production to marketing (Kline et al., 1987). To ensure the economic success of these new crops in the United States, farmers should familiarize themselves with the market potential of the new crops. Production practices in established growing areas should be studied, while cultural practice information is developed on site. Lack of an established production base to guarantee vegetable brokers a continued product supply, inadequate labor, scarcity of propagating materials, and lack of research base information on the production of these crops are limiting factors for ethnic crop production in Missouri.

**IMPORT VS. LOCAL PRODUCTION**

Imported produce is usually sold at premium prices. Retail prices at specialty shops in St. Louis were $33.00/kg for ‘Scotch Bonnet’ pepper, $4.40/kg for yam, and $2.20/kg for calabaza during Summer 1989 (D. Maxwell, specialty shop manager, St. Louis, personal communication). Retail prices are no reflection of farmers’ profit; however, if the numerous middle men are eliminated, farmers’ profits should improve. Several factors such as storage requirements, crop quality, available quantity, and production price control the availability of ethnic crops to the American public. These factors can be managed to ensure a steady supply. However, this may not be in the best interest of the supplier, who is guaranteed a price increase when supply is limited.

Appropriate postharvest handling and proper storage are priorities for the product to reach the United States in conditions acceptable to the consumer. However, there is limited use of adequate postharvest handling techniques of these exotic crops in the countries where these crops are produced. Quality control is very stringent, allowing for only top grade fruits and vegetables. Since most of the export business is done on consignment, there is significant monetary loss by both broker and farmer in the absence of adequate postharvest handling and rapid transportation. Another aspect attracting close scrutiny by quality controllers at the port of entry is...