

# Ethnic Vegetables: Hispanic

## Introduction

The term ‘Hispanic’ (or ‘Latino’) is generally used in the United States as a designation for Spanish speaking peoples originating from Mexico, Central America, South America, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. This culturally diverse group now represents the largest and fastest growing minority in the U.S.

The Hispanic influence on American cuisine is particularly evident in Mexican, Tex-Mex, and similar cooking styles. Mexican food is currently one of the most popular ethnic cuisines in the U.S. Mexican entrées and ingredients can be found in major grocery chains, as well as dining establishments that range from street food to fast food to fine dining. Additionally, there is an interest among consumers in purchasing the fresh, often unique, ingredients required for preparing ethnic dishes at home. Some of the more common vegetables and herbs used in Hispanic dishes, such as cilantro and jalapeno peppers, are already grown in Kentucky. However, there are also a number of other traditional and specialty Hispanic crops that could be produced and marketed here, both to Hispanics and non-Hispanics.

## Marketing and Market Outlook

There is a growing demand for ethnic fruits, vegetables, and herbs, particularly in



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larger cities. One obvious reason for this is the increased ethnic diversity of these areas. Many ethnic groups, including Hispanics, have a high per capita consumption of fresh produce. Also contributing to the increased demand for ethnic produce is a greater emphasis on healthy foods and the public’s seemingly insatiable desire for variety in their diets. The increased growth of Kentucky’s Hispanic population, along with these other factors, present an opportunity for local growers to develop a product mix aimed at these markets.

Many Hispanics have a tradition of purchasing their food ingredients from open air markets, which would seem to make farmers markets an ideal outlet for offering ethnic crops. Growers could investigate adding traditionally Hispanic vegetables to their roadside stand mix, as well. Restaurants, particularly those specializing in Mexican or vegetarian dishes, may be interested

in purchasing fresh, locally-grown ingredients. Hispanic products, along with other specialty or ethnic vegetables, could be added to

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a community supported agriculture (CSA) share. Growers may also try direct-marketing their products to ethnic grocers and neighborhoods in large cities.

A relatively small volume of each vegetable type is in demand at any one time or place so this market can easily become saturated. To guard against market saturation, the grower should develop a special niche by supplying fresh, tender crops harvested at their peak, packaging them attractively, and choosing a variety of clients and market mixes. Freshness of produce is the key to gaining the Hispanic market.

Some of the challenges of marketing these vegetables to Hispanic customers includes identifying the crops preferred by the target market and presenting the crop in the correct dialect for the buyer. Hispanic food preferences vary from country to country and region to region. For example, while some Latin American cultures primarily use black beans in their cooking, others prefer pinto beans, and still others predominantly cook with red beans. As with any new market, the best way to determine what to grow is to find out what the customer wants. Additionally, the same ingredient or crop may be identified by different Spanish names, depending on the specific region or country. Providing signage in Spanish will be important in attracting Hispanic buyers. First-hand knowledge of the culture, customs, and language will be extremely valuable both in producing and marketing these products to this particular consumer base.

Marketing ethnic products to non-Hispanic customers will not be without its own challenges. Farmers markets are a great venue for introducing unusual fresh produce and value-added products. However, consumers unfamiliar with your selections may be more comfortable making a purchase when preparation instructions and/or recipes are provided. Supplying educational information about the vegetable's name, where and how it is grown, and other background

information can also help promote unusual crops to non-Hispanics.

Growers interested in producing any ethnic or specialty vegetable should always start small and test-market the crop before investing much time or money in production. Larger plantings should not be attempted unless the grower has an established market. In order to discover the market for a new crop like Hispanic vegetables, producers should first communicate with potential consumers to determine their preferences for products. Cultivating a local market for a new crop, such as an ethnic vegetable variety, often becomes a sort of partnership between the producer and his or her target consumer.

## **Production Considerations**

### *Potential crops*

Currently the most common Kentucky-produced vegetables used in Hispanic cooking include hot peppers, corn, Roma tomatoes, winter and summer squashes, cilantro, sweet potatoes, and onions. Tomatillo, a tomato-like fruit that is the key ingredient in salsas and chili sauces, has been marketed in Western and Central Kentucky. Dry beans are common in many Hispanic cultures, but it will be important to identify the specific type in demand by the target market.

The crops listed in Table 1 have been identified as popular ingredients in Hispanic cooking. These particular crops may have potential for Kentucky production based on cultivation and hardiness information gleaned from the Internet. Talking to potential Hispanic customers about the crops they would like to purchase could provide additional ideas. Keep in mind that crops native to countries south of the border may not be hardy in Kentucky. Since local research data on many of the crops in Table 1 is lacking, growers should start small to determine which crops are suitable for their area. It is advisable to evaluate different cultivars and/or seed sources over multiple seasons and to test market the crops before attempting larger plantings.

### *Site selection and planting*

A number of Hispanic crops belong to botanical families that are well-known to Kentucky growers, and include cucurbits, legumes, and solanaceous plants. Some ethnic vegetables are merely a different subspecies or cultivar of crops commonly grown in North America. Cultural requirements for these closely related crops are often very similar to traditional vegetable crops. Nevertheless, growers may need to rely on their own on-farm trials to identify the best production methods for these specialty crops.

In general, choose a site that is well-drained and warms up quickly in the spring. Avoid low-lying fields that are subject to late frosts and high humidity. Cold-sensitive crops should not be planted until all danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed sufficiently. Transplants can be grown in a greenhouse structure or hotbed, both for direct sales or on-farm use.

Some crops require a continuous supply of moisture, especially during fruit-set and development. UK research has reported greater yields, increased earliness, and a cleaner harvest when growing most vegetable crops on raised beds with black plastic mulch and drip irrigation. The moisture levels under the plastic must be carefully monitored when using this system.

### *Pest management*

Disease and insect pressure for ethnic vegetables can vary depending on the crop, the cultivar, and the season. Chemical control methods may be limited since few pesticides are registered for many of these specialty crops. Integrated pest management (IPM) strategies, including frequent scouting to monitor pests, may be needed to prevent or reduce losses. Controlling weeds, sanitation, following a good rotation system, and the use of beneficial insects can aid in pest control.

### *Harvest and storage*

Freshness is the key in marketing Hispanic vegetables; therefore they should be harvested at their peak. Limiting the market radius to

easy traveling distance will help ensure the freshest specialty produce. Little storage time is needed for crops to be sold within a few days of harvest.

### *Labor requirements*

Many traditional Hispanic vegetables are produced using methods similar to comparable vegetables already grown in Kentucky. Producers can refer to Crop Diversification and Biofuel Research and Education Center crop profiles to estimate labor requirements for these specific vegetables. Plasticulture will add 8 to 10 hours more per acre for the post-harvest removal and disposal of the plastic.

A producer often begins with small amounts of a new crop for a niche market. Small amounts of these specialty vegetables can potentially be added to existing plots using similar cultural techniques. This could help minimize additional labor requirements.

## **Economic Considerations**

Initial investments include land preparation and purchase of seed or transplants. Producers need to closely manage costs of key inputs, especially seed, when producing specialty vegetables. Seed for some ethnic vegetables can be more expensive, so purchasing a variety that does not meet a customer's preference can be a costly miscalculation. Additional costs are incurred with the installation of an irrigation system and plastic mulch.

Producers should carefully consider differences in production costs for ethnic vegetables. In addition to potentially higher seed costs, producers may incur greater labor times and prices lower than comparable products. For example, the returns over total costs per 100 foot by 4 foot bed of Roma tomatoes, will likely fall in the \$100 to \$200 range when compared to possible returns exceeding \$500 for the same sized bed of heirloom varieties. This is due to greater harvest times and (usually) lower prices for Roma tomatoes.

Pricing a new or specialty crop is also a key consideration. Producers should access available wholesale and retail market prices for Hispanic vegetables to determine what price the market can bear. Wholesale prices for many vegetables are reported daily or weekly through the USDA

Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) in their Fruit and Vegetable Market News. Visiting Hispanic food stores or specialty retailers can also provide producers with an idea of what prices to ask for specialty crops.

TABLE 1. SELECTED VEGETABLES AND HERBS THAT ARE USED IN HISPANIC COOKING AND MAY HAVE POTENTIAL FOR KENTUCKY PRODUCTION.

Common Name	Botanical Name	Family Name	Parts Used/ Eaten	Alternate Names & Notes
Amaranth, vegetable	<i>Amaranthus gangeticus</i>	Amaranthaceae	Greens	Also called leafy amaranth; cultivars grown for leaves instead of grain
Beans: Pinto, Red, and Black (Turtle)	<i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i>	Fabaceae	Dry seeds	
Beans: Yardlong	<i>Vigna sesquipedalis</i>	Fabaceae	Dry seeds	
Calabaza	<i>Cucurbita moschata</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Fruit	Hard shelled winter squash
Calabacita or Calabacin	<i>Cucurbita pepo</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Fruit	Also called grey squash; a summer squash similar to zucchini
Cilantro	<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	Apiaceae	Leaves	Herb
Corn, black sweet	<i>Zea mays</i>	Poaceae	Fruit	
Corn, flour	<i>Zea mays</i>	Poaceae	Fruit	Kernels are soft and starchier than other types; includes blue corn
Culantro	<i>Eryngium foetidum</i>	Apiaceae	Leaves	Herb; may need to start in a greenhouse
Eggplant	<i>Solanum melongena</i>	Solanaceae	Fruit	Some Hispanic groups prefer pink cultivars with white striations
Epazote	<i>Dryspania ambrosioides</i> <i>Chenopodium ambrosioides</i>	Amaranthaceae	Leaves	Highly invasive
Gherkins	<i>Melothria scabra</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Fruit	Also called Mexican sour pickle
Hot Peppers	<i>Capsicum annuum</i>	Solanaceae	Fruit	e.g. Chilaca, Chili, Chile de arbol, Guajillo, Habanero, Jalapeno, Poblano, Serrano
Huauzontle	<i>Chenopodium nuttaliae</i> <i>C. berlandieri sub sp. nuttaliae</i>	Amaranthaceae	Leaves; seed heads	Also called Aztec spinach
Okra	<i>Abelmoschus esculentus</i>	Malvales	Fruit	
Onions	<i>Allium cepa</i>	Alliaceae	Bulb	
Papalo	<i>Porophyllum ruderale</i>	Asteraceae	Leaves	Very frost sensitive

TABLE 1 (CONT'D). SELECTED VEGETABLES AND HERBS THAT ARE USED IN HISPANIC COOKING AND MAY HAVE POTENTIAL FOR KENTUCKY PRODUCTION.

Common Name	Botanical Name	Family Name	Parts Used/ Eaten	Alternate Names & Notes
Peanuts	<i>Arachis hypogena</i>	Fabaceae	Seed	
Pericon	<i>Tagetes lucida</i>	Asteraceae	Leaves & flowers	Also called Mexican tarragon
Squash blossoms	<i>Cucurbita spp.</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Flowers	
Squash, winter (see also Calabaza)	<i>Cucurbita moschata</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Fruit	
Stevia	<i>Stevia rebaudiana</i>	Asteraceae	Leaves	Also called sweet leaf; a sweetener native to South America
Sweetpotato	<i>Ipomea batatas</i>	Convolvulaceae	Root	Particularly white-fleshed/dry-fleshed cultivars
Tomatillos	<i>Physalis ixocarpa</i>	Solanaceae	Fruit	Also called husk tomato
Tomatoes, Roma	<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i>	Solanaceae	Fruit	Preferred for their meatier texture and lower water content
Verdolaga	<i>Portulaca oleracea</i>	Portulacaceae	Leaves	Also called common purslane; cultivated varieties have a more upright growth habit

### Selected Resources

- Vegetable Production Guide for Commercial Growers, ID-36 (University of Kentucky)  
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id36/id36.htm>
- Around the World at Farmers' Market (Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, 2002)  
[http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/2002\\_proceedings/ethnic\\_fruits\\_veggies\\_herbs.pdf](http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/2002_proceedings/ethnic_fruits_veggies_herbs.pdf)
- Ethnic and Specialty Vegetables Handbook (Maryland Cooperative Extension, 2004)  
[http://www.marylandethnicvegetable.com/Ethnic\\_Specialty\\_Vegetables\\_Handbook2.html](http://www.marylandethnicvegetable.com/Ethnic_Specialty_Vegetables_Handbook2.html)
- Hispanic American Influence on the U.S. Food Industry (USDA ARS, 2002)  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/outreach/HFood.html>
- Hispanic Market in the U.S. – Opportunities and Challenges for the Food Industry (Cornell University, 2006)  
[http://hortmgt.aem.cornell.edu/pdf/smart\\_marketing/cuellar7-06.pdf](http://hortmgt.aem.cornell.edu/pdf/smart_marketing/cuellar7-06.pdf)

- Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Small Farm Center, University of California-Davis, 1998) *Available for purchase only. Information on the handbook contents:*  
<http://sfp.ucdavis.edu/Docs/publications.asp?view=5>  
*Order online at:*  
<http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/SmallFarms/3346.aspx>
- Specialty Vegetables (ATTRA, 2002)  
<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=36>
- World Crops (Rutgers, University of Massachusetts, and Cornell Cooperative Extension Services)  
<http://www.worldcrops.org/>

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For additional information, contact your local [County Extension](#) agent