



SPECIALTY VEGETABLES

CURRENT TOPIC

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NCAT Agriculture Specialist
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Introduction

Specialty vegetables are oddballs. They are sometimes oddly sized or shaped or colored. They are often difficult to grow, or are grown out of season, or are foreign to where they are grown. They may be miniatures or heirlooms or vegetables prized by gourmet cooks. But what they all have in common, besides being somehow unusual, is that they command a higher price than their ordinary counterparts. And specialty vegetables are in great enough demand that there are wide markets for them in wholesale, retail, and direct sales.

According to Tristan Millar, marketing director at Frieda's Inc., Los Alamitos, California, two main categories of consumers gravitate toward specialty items. First are ethnic groups for whom specialty produce is a staple. Ethnic groups such as Indians, Latinos, and Asians make up the majority of specialty produce buyers. Then there are high-end buyers for whom specialty items are not everyday fare, but who enjoy gourmet produce and culinary variety (1).

Robert Schueller, assistant marketing director at World Variety Produce Inc., Los Angeles, notes there is a trend in the U.S. today toward turning the kitchen into an entertainment center, where people gather not only to socialize but to watch and learn as their friends prepare exotic foods. The five top-selling items from World Variety Produce, a major shipper of specialty produce, are jalapeño peppers, serrano peppers, tomatillos, shallots, and pasilla peppers (1).

Keep in mind that consumer demand for specific specialty items changes rapidly; also, the first grower who markets a kind of produce may prosper – until other growers start growing the same thing, or until it becomes commonplace. Gourmet food magazines and television shows will help you know what is currently in vogue. Specialty vegetables can be grouped into four broad categories.

Miniature/Baby Vegetables

About 10 years ago, the demand for miniature vegetables created one of the most rapidly expanding “specialty crop” markets in the U.S. The sharp rise in the popularity of baby-size vegetables began in Europe and was followed by their use in fine restaurants in the U.S. The trend spread rapidly, so that many types of miniatures now appear in specialty stores, roadside stands, salad bars, and supermarkets.

Popular miniature vegetables include beets, carrots, corn, petite pois (peas), fillet beans, lettuce, greens, leeks, onions, cauliflower, eggplant, tomatoes, potatoes, and summer squash. Some

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miniatures, such as cherry tomatoes and fingerling potatoes, are naturally small. Varieties like the King Richard leek and Parmex carrot are bred for smallness, while baby corn comes from dense planting and early harvest. And the “baby” carrots you find in many supermarkets are in fact ordinary carrots that have been pared to size.

In general, the same production practices used for normal-sized vegetables are used for miniature vegetables, except for closer spacing and earlier harvest. Timeliness in harvesting is important, as baby vegetables can quickly grow larger than desired.

Specialty Lettuce and Greens

Mesclun or salad mix is a blend of lettuces and greens cut at the seedling stage (3 to 4 weeks). A number of seed companies are selling custom blended seeds with mouth-watering names such as chef’s blend, spring mix, spicy mix, and braising mix. The blend of color, texture, and flavor can be tailored to a specific market or customer. Edible flowers such as nasturtiums, calendulas, violas, pansies, or scarlet runner beans can add unique color and flavor. For more information, see the ATTRA publications [Specialty Lettuce and Greens](#) and [Edible Flowers](#).

Although mesclun is still relatively new, some people are already saying it is passé: the new rage is “wild salad mix” consisting of greens that are usually classified as weeds. Edible wild greens include lamb’s quarter (*Chenopodium album*), dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), shepherd’s purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*), amaranth (*Amaranthus* species), chickweed (*Stellaria media*), curly dock (*Rumex crispus*), plantain (*Plantago major*, *rugelii*, and *lanceolata*), purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), and winter cress (*Barbarea vulgaris* and *verna*). These wild greens are exceptionally high in nutrients – and easy to grow.

Ethnic Vegetables

Steve Salt (2), a market gardener in Kirksville, Missouri, who’s found his niche in specialty vegetables, defines an ethnic group as one that practices its own distinctive customs and traditions and – most important for the market gardener – diet or cuisine. Oriental or Asian vegetables have become one of the most popular specialty types in this country. Mexican cuisine has also become popular, introducing us to a wonderful array of peppers – such as the anaheim, poblano, serrano, jalapeño, and pasilla – and other crops like chayote, cilantro, jicama, prickly pear cactus, and tomatillo.

As a market gardener, in addition to my work as an agriculture specialist for NCAT, it has been my experience that the best way to learn about ethnic vegetable varieties is to talk with the people who use them. Of the specialty vegetables I grow, one of the most popular is eggplant, not just because it is eggplant, but because eggplant comes in numerous sizes, shapes, and colors. It seems that different ethnic groups, even different individuals, have their favorites. One couple from Bangladesh, who shop at the Fayetteville Farmers’ Market, appreciated the varieties of eggplants that I grew, and asked me whether I would be interested in trying to grow other Asian vegetables. The next year they not only provided seed for a dozen different vegetables, but also came out to my farm to give me advice on planting, harvesting, and cooking. Ridge gourd, bitter gourd, wax gourd, winter melon, yard long bean, hyacinth bean, amaranth greens, and kangkong or water spinach were among the new introductions to my garden. A Chinese-American friend told me her mother in California liked to buy bunches of garlic-chive flower bud stalks. Sure enough, when I took some of these to the Farmers’ Market, our Chinese customers soon noticed them. After I tried the chives myself, chopped up into a stir fry or stew, I was able to rave about them to any customer

who showed the slightest interest. A woman from India, upon learning that I was willing to try new things, subsequently brought me seed for her favorite eggplant variety and a number of Indian legumes. Furthermore, these customers helped me market the produce by telling their friends. What a wonderful way to develop grower/consumer relationships!

Heirloom Vegetables

What is an heirloom? Lawrence Davis-Hollander, director of the Eastern Native Seed Conservancy (3), explains:

[Heirloom] is a loosely based word, probably first coined (in relation to plants) by the eastern Massachusetts bean collector John Withee and expanded by the seed movement. And becoming greatly misunderstood and bastardized. Basically it refers to plants (seeds) handed down from generation to generation through families and friends and neighbors – creating an heirloom AND seeds of a particular age, probably about 50 years or more (like the American definition of antique) dating to WWII and before. Therefore Heirloom seeds tend to be fifty years old or more and may or may not have been handed down.

Tomatoes have always been a staple of the home garden, and heirloom varieties are the most popular of all heirloom vegetables. As Cindy McDee (4), another seed saver, comments, “These tomatoes generally have that luscious taste you remember and long for.”

Heirloom tomatoes tend to be more prone to bruising and are not as uniform as tomatoes that have been bred for long-distance shipping and a standard picture-perfect image. To prevent damage to tender-skinned varieties, growers should take care not to stack too many in a picking bucket. One of the enclosed articles describes the shallow, reusable, and stackable storage and marketing flats used by CSA Works in Massachusetts. You may be able to prevent some of the cracking that seems to occur in some heirlooms by picking them as they begin to ripen and allowing them to ripen indoors – out of the sun – rather than letting them ripen on the vine.

Tomatoes, of course, are not the only heirlooms of interest. The Seed Savers Exchange (SSE) (5), a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of heirloom vegetables and fruits, offers access to 11,000 rare varieties provided by SSE’s members in an annual *Seed Savers Yearbook*. Many are true heirlooms brought to North America when gardeners and farmers immigrated. Chiogga beet, Jacob’s Cattle bean, Moon and Stars watermelon, Rouge Vif d’Etampes squash, Marconi Red pepper, and Forellenschlus lettuce are a only a sampling of those listed in the *Seed Savers Heirloom Seeds and Gifts Catalog*. Most commercial vegetable seed companies also offer at least a few heirloom vegetable varieties and many of the small seed companies listed in the ATTRA publication *Suppliers of Organic and Non-GE Vegetable Seeds and Plants* specialize in heirloom seeds.

Local farmers’ markets and restaurants are good places to sell heirloom and other unusual vegetables. You have the advantage of dealing directly with potential customers whom you can tell all about the fine qualities of your produce, and who can also taste samples. For more information on specific direct marketing techniques, you may want to request the publications listed under *Marketing and Business* in ATTRA’s *Publications List*.

References

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- 2) Steve Salt
GreenValley Farm
RR 1, Box 263
Kirksville, MO 63501-9734
Saltsgvf@istlaplata.net
- 3) Lawrence Davis-Hollander, Director
Eastern Native Seed Conservancy
NatSeeds@aol.com
<http://gemini.berkshire.net>
- 4) McDee, Cindy. 2001. Tomato Seed Share List.
Accessed on-line. <<http://pages.whowhere.com/community/cindymcee/>>
- 5) Seed Savers Exchange
3076 North Winn Road
Decorah, IA 52101
319-382-5990
319-382-5872 FAX
sse@rconnect.com
<http://www.seedsavers.com>

Enclosures

General

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Baby Vegetables

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Brown, Greg. 2001. Heirloom tomato market expanding as popularity grows. The Vegetable Grower News. April. p. 14-15, 18.

Mendelson, Kathy. 2001. What makes a plant an heirloom? Countryside & Small Stock Journal. March-April. p. 34-35.

Resources

ATTRA Publications

[Suppliers of Organic and/or Non-GE Seeds & Plants](#)

[Specialty Lettuce and Greens: Organic Production](#)

[Edible Flowers](#)

[Resource Guide to Organic & Sustainable Vegetable Production](#)

[Direct Marketing](#)

Books

Anon. 1998. Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook. 2nd ed. Small Farm Center. University of California, Publication 3346. 184 p.

Brief fact sheets on more than 60 minor vegetables. Each crop is summarized with a color photo, marketing, cultural, and harvesting information, plus seed sources and references for further reading. To order, send a check payable to UC Regents to the address below, or call 1-800-994-8849. The cost is \$35 for the book (item number 3346-B3) plus \$5 shipping.

University of California

Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Communication Services—Publications

6701 San Pablo Avenue

Oakland, CA 94608-1239

Ashworth, Suzanne. 1998. Seed to Seed. Seed Saver Publications. 222 p.

Techniques for growing and saving seed from vegetables.

Cook, Alan (ed.). 1986. Oriental Herbs and Vegetables. Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn, NY. 76 p.

Illustrated descriptions of Oriental vegetables include botanical names, uses, cooking and growing techniques.

Available for \$15 from:

Brooklyn Botanic Gardens
1000 Washington Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11225

Creasy, Rosalind. 1999. *The Edible Heirloom Garden*. Periplus Editions. 112 p.

Creasy has authored a number of specialty crop books in The Edible Garden Series. Topics include Asian, Mexican, rainbow, pepper, French, Italian, flower, salad, and herb gardens.

Isaacson, Richard T. (ed.). 2000. *Source List of Plants and Seeds*, 5th ed. Andersen Horticultural Library, Chanhassen, MN.

The Andersen Horticultural Library's Source List of Plants & Seeds is an excellent resource for finding any kind of seed or plant. It is updated regularly at the web site <<http://plantinfo.umn.edu>>. There is a subscription fee. Available from:

Andersen Horticultural Library
Minnesota Landscape Arboretum
3675 Arboretum Drive, P.O. Box 39
Chanhassen, MN 55317-0039

Larcom, Joy. 1991. *Oriental Vegetables: The Complete Guide for Garden and Kitchen*. Kodansha International. 232 p.

Descriptions of vegetables, edible wild plants, and herbs include botanical names, other common names, and Asian names. The book is amazingly complete with background notes, cultivation requirements and techniques, pest management, harvest, storage, varieties, and recipes. For a soft-cover copy at \$12.25, contact:

A1Books.com
11 Steward Place
Fairfield, NJ 07004
<http://www.a1books.com>

Male, Carolyn. 1999. *100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden*. Workman Publishing, NY. 246 p.

Covers when to plant seeds and transplant seedlings, ways to prevent foliage diseases, cultivation, propagation, and more.

Stephens, James. 1988. *Manual of Minor Vegetables*. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Bulletin SP-40. 123 p.

Contains photographs and descriptions of about 150 minor vegetable and herb crops. Available from:

Publication Distribution Center
P.O. Box 110011
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611
352-392-1764

Weaver, William Woys. 1999. *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening: A Master Gardener's Guide to Planting, Seed Saving, and Cultural History*. Henry Holt & Co. LLC. 462 p.

Bulletins, Periodicals, and Articles

The Packer. Vance Publishing Co. 10901 W. 84th Terr., Lenexa, KS 66214-1631.

Provides news of what is current in the produce industry and information on packing supplies and equipment. Subscription rates are \$65 per year. Copies of The Packer's 2001 Produce Services Sourcebook are available at \$20 per copy.

Gooch, Jamie. 1995. What's so special about specialty vegetables? *American Vegetable Grower*. September. p. 17-18.

Kelly, William Terry. 1999. Chinese cabbage and related oriental crops. Commercial Vegetable Production. University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service. 12 p. <<http://www.ces.uga.edu/>>.

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Sciarappa, William. 2001. Strawberries and ethnic vegetables can be profitable mix. The Vegetable Growers News. April. p. 32-33, 42.

Slattery, Patrick. 2000. The chicken chronicles: Serving ethnic markets. Acres U.S.A. November. p. 22.

Van Horn, Mark and Claudia Myers. 1991. Baby Corn. University of California SMC-003. 2 p.

Available on the Web

Eastern Native Seed Conservancy

<http://gemini.berkshire.net>

Endeavors to preserve rare genetic stock and to educate people about regional food resources. An annual Tomato Fete is held to promote heirloom tomatoes. The Conservancy also puts major effort into an Heirloom Tomato Field Project. The organization is working closely with chefs, farmers, distributors, and a number of different value-added producers to find new products and outlets for heirloom varieties. The goal is to combine conservation with regional small-scale sustainable development. The Conservancy plans to use the model developed to focus on bringing greater awareness to other crops in the not-too-distant future.

Baby Corn. 2000. By Carol A. Miles and Leslie Zenz. A Pacific Northwest Extension Publication. PNW0532. Washington State University.

<http://www.orst.edu/>

Baby Corn. 1999. Oregon State University. Commercial Vegetable Production Guides.
<http://www.orst.edu/>

Heirloom Seeds
<http://heirloomseeds.com/tomatoes.htm>

Heirloom Tomatoes, From Black Krimms to White Wonders, Proliferate in Farmers' Markets.
<http://www.seasonalchef.com/>

Merchants and Purveyors of Heirloom Seeds
<http://halcyon.com/tmend/links.htm>

Specialty Vegetables: A Small-Scale Agriculture Alternative
<http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/pubs/brochures/Specialtyveg.html>

Specialty Asian vegetable production in South Florida. 1996. By Mary L. Lamberts. HS 740 from Vegetable Production Guide for Florida, SP170. University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service. 5 p.
<http://extension.ifas.ufl.edu/>.

Seed Sources

Evergreen Y.H. Enterprises
P.O. Box 17538
Anaheim, CA 92817
714- 637-5769 Tel/Fax
<http://www.evergreenseeds.com>

Kitazawa Seed Co
P.O. Box 13220
Oakland CA 94661-3220
510-595-1188
510-595-1860 Fax
kitaseed@pacbell.net

Japanese and Asian vegetable seeds are the main focus.

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