

CONSUMER CAMPAIGN TARGETS ETHNIC PRODUCE AT ARLINGTON MARKETS

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Editors note: Many thanks to Kelly for her insightful article about recent ethnic produce marketing efforts in the DC area. Kelly was contracted as a marketing consultant and project outreach coordinator under the auspices of a 2003 SARE grant project directed by Jason Murray, VCE agent in Loudon County.

The immigration boom of the 1990's has changed the landscape of Washington DC and its surrounding suburbs. According to 2000 census figures, more than one in four Arlington residents is originally from another country. In Arlington County, roughly half of the immigrants are from Latin America, but newcomers have arrived from far and wide with other large groups coming from India, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Mexico, Philippines, and Pakistan. The growing diversity in Arlington has brought with it many new influences, including food from other cultures. Recognizing this as an opportunity, the Extension offices in Loudoun and Arlington received a grant from the federal Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE) to explore the demand for ethnic foods and the potential to develop a niche market for local farmers.

More specifically, the grant provided funds for the extension offices to team up with three area farms (Redbud, Red Rake, and Wheatland) to gather production data of various ethnic crops and to hire an outreach coordinator to promote the specialty produce at two Arlington Farmers' Markets.

Market-goers were introduced to a variety of ethnic produce, and while some were more familiar to customers than others, general observations indicated a lack of knowledge about most of the offerings. The crops selected, included:

- Tomatillos, often used in salsas;
- Amaranth greens, widely grown in West Africa;
- Daikons, giant white radishes used in Indian and Japanese dishes;
- Okra, used to thicken soups and stews or in stir fries;
- Epazote [eh-paw-ZOH-teh], an herb which is commonly used in black bean dishes to help reduce gas; and
- Other herbs such as Cilantro, Thai Basil, and Lemongrass

Over the course of this year's growing season, a variety of marketing strategies were employed to raise awareness and make products more approachable to a wider audience of customers. One of the first steps taken was the creation of a logo to give the project a brand identity. A new website was also launched so that curious customers could learn more about the produce featured at the markets. The "World Produce" site includes photographs, tips on storage, recipes, and information about the taste and nutritional value of different herbs and vegetables. Other powerful tools that encouraged customers to try new foods were coupons, media coverage, and cooking demos.

In August, a market survey was conducted at the Arlington Courthouse farmers' market (which serves an upper income community) and the Columbia Pike market (which is located in an ethnically diverse community). One of the survey questions asked customers to indicate how frequently they purchase ethnic produce from the farmers' market. The majority of the customers from the Courthouse market responded that they buy ethnic produce only occasionally, and that

they are most likely to buy Asian herbs, Mexican herbs, Middle Eastern squash, and hot peppers. Whereas nearly half of the responses from customers at the Columbia Pike market indicated that they buy ethnic produce regularly and are most likely to buy Asian herbs, Mexican herbs, okra, and hot peppers.

Gradually, this project has begun to generate visibility in the community and at the markets, but more work will be needed to fully establish and sustain a customer-base for ethnic produce. In the end, surveys and observations from the project participants have demonstrated there is sufficient customer interest to warrant efforts to further develop this niche market.

For more information about this project or to obtain a copy of the final report, contact Kelly Luck at or 703-242-2195. You can also visit the World Produce website at: www.arlingtonfarmersmarket.com/worldproduce/.

More details will follow from the grant's crop production coordinator Jason Murray once the harvest season concludes. Some popular items that appear to be quite successful include Asian Cucumbers such as "Orient Express", Lebanese Zucchini, and Asian Purple Eggplant amongst many others with varying degrees of potential.

As an additional education initiative, the SARE grant funded a full day motor coach tour of specialty crops and marketing venues including: the Specialty/Ethnic vegetable research plots at the Southern Maryland Research Station, High tunnel and specialty crops production at Davon Crest Farms in Hurlock Maryland, and a tour of the Cheltenham Auction in Southern Maryland. In addition to the 31 participants in the bus trip, 35 farmers attended a twilight tour of Wheatland Vegetable Farms hosted by project collaborators Chip and Susan Planck, to learn about specialty and sustainable crop production.





Grant collaborator specialty produce stands in Arlington area farmers market: Wheatland Vegetable Farms, Red Rake Farm and Red Bud Farm.



Daikon Radish



Tomatillos



Amaranth Greens

Examples of specialty crops grown by participating farms

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