



According to Project Leader, Dr. Rao Mentreddy, this research has allowed production of “Organic and specialty vegetables without any residual chemicals [which] are considered more healthy than conventionally grown vegetables; this project is bound to not only improve the health of Alabama citizens, but also provide sustainable means of income generation for small farm owners; and thus create a positive economic impact within the state.”

Development of Ethnic Vegetable Crops as Niche Market Cash Crops to Sustain Small Farms in Alabama

Who cares and why?

The target groups of this impact are small farm holders, vegetable gardeners, and hobby gardeners. The ethnic vegetable crops are a high value niche –market crops aimed at marketing to the immigrant populations. Context: Small farm owners must constantly innovate, diversify crops, and seek creative marketing in order to be sustainable over the long term. Ethnic vegetable crops provide diversity and draw in non-traditional customers looking for vegetables they grew up consuming in their home countries. They are willing to pay premium prices for the vegetables for which they long.

What has the project done so far?

We have successfully demonstrated the production potential of a wide range of 35 Indian, Chinese, and Hispanic vegetable crops at the Alabama A&M University Winfred Thomas Agricultural Research Station in 2013 and 2014. Each year, two Field Days were organized to show the farmers, gardeners, and community members how these various vegetables look like, how to grow them using organic production systems, and how to cook them. At each Field Day some of the vegetables were harvested from the experiment plots and cooked, and attendees (~75-90) were given samples to taste.

In 2010, the value of fresh market vegetables in the United States (US) was \$10.9 billion. The overall US organic food market exceeded \$31 billion in 2011, and demand for such products continues to grow. Yet, the US remains a net importer of fresh market vegetables, mainly from Mexico. Statistics from the success of Georgia and Kentucky reveal an abundance of opportunities for developing the production of ethnic and specialty vegetables, such as niche market cash crops that are more likely to become sustainable forms of agricultural production.



Community members, faculty and other researchers observe demonstration at the Winfred Thomas Agricultural Research Station.

Impact Statement

Several farmers have shown interest in knowledge about these ethnic vegetable crops, their adaptability to Alabama environments, and their production techniques. Some farmers have included them in their portfolio of summer vegetable crops and have begun growing them.

Farmer groups such as Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network and North Alabama Food Policy Council have begun featuring ethnic vegetable crops in their discussion forums. ASAN has included ethnic vegetable crops in 2014 Forum series across the state of Alabama. The PI, Dr. Mentreddy is now being requested to hold round table discussions with farmers in North and South Alabama. He has been invited by the organizers of Alabama Fruit and Vegetable growers Association to make a presentation on ethnic vegetable crops at the AFVGA Conference in February 2015.

Over the last two years, production potential of various ethnic vegetable crops, their adaptability, and cultivation requirements have been determined. However, there is a need for determining the production economics, cost: benefit ratios, markets, market potential, and market strategies.

Ethnic vegetables such as chayote, Caribbean pumpkin, poblano and other peppers, specialty radishes,

tomatillos, bitter melon, and Malabar spinach are just a few of the varieties and types of unique vegetables that are not readily found in fresh markets throughout Alabama. Through innovative outreach strategies it is expected the results of this project will help stimulate local and regional growth of specialty vegetable production, therefore improving the financial status of small- and medium-sized family farms.

Want to know more?

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Additional links: <http://www.aces.edu/urban/AEFSN/> and <http://www.umes.edu/ard/Default.aspx?id=46285>

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