

Soon for sale? Ethnic veggies like maxixe and shiso

January 12 2012, By Aaron Munzer



Chaw Chang and Lucy Garrison, owners of Stick and Stone Farm in Ulysses, N.Y., at the Ithaca Farmer's Market Winter Market with their children Ezra and Greta, and some of their Asian vegetable offerings, tat soi and napa cabbage. (Aaron Munzer)

Komatsuna. Shiso. Winged beans. Maxixe. They're not your garden-variety vegetables.

But while they may be relatively unknown outside of their home countries, a project by Cornell Cooperative Extension is trying to give these [crops](#) their time in the sun.

Extension associate Robert Hadad, who works with the Cornell Vegetable Program, is planning various trials of these and other crops in conjunction with growers in Monroe, Wayne and Ontario counties, in

addition to extension-owned fields.

Successful outcomes could bring such unusual ethnic vegetables to farmers markets and dinner tables across the state and region. They would also offer a new option for locavores and a comforting, familiar one to [immigrant families](#), especially the fast-growing Asian and Latino communities.

"It's also for the Eastern European heritage community; Russians, Serbians, a lot of these people have been here for a number of years, but they're used to certain foods from their homeland that aren't usually available," Hadad said. "It's bringing local food closer to home for them."

Hadad is seeking to determine which vegetables can be grown in the Northeast's climate, how best to introduce the varieties to growers and how to get consumers to buy them.

To these ends, Hadad recently held a workshop in conjunction with associate professor Frank Mangan of the University of Massachusetts for local growers in Canandaigua that introduced them to the crops and allowed him to gauge interest in the idea.

Mangan has completed a number of field trials of Latino varieties that have seen success in Massachusetts farmers markets and Whole Food stores, including such crops as Brazilian squash and water spinach. Hadad said he will build on Mangan's research in choosing crops to experiment with in New York.

"He gave our growers a lot of inspiration about what's capable of being grown here," Hadad said.

Next up for Hadad is reaching out to the [immigrant communities](#) to let

them know that a little taste from home thousands of miles away is being grown by the farmer down the road.

"If we can get a few people to come out, I'm sure word of mouth will be our biggest ally," he said.

Mangan said for New York farmers, the millions of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans present a profitable demographic. "These are relatively new immigrant groups, and there are tremendous opportunities to grow crops that they use. They don't eat sweet corn; they want grain corn or field corn," he said.

Ulysses-based farmers Lucy Garrison and Chaw Chang, who run Stick and Stone Farm, which sells certified organic vegetables through a community supported agriculture (CSA) program and at the Ithaca Farmers Market, have experimented with a number of ethnic vegetable varieties, mostly Asian greens.

Garrison said there are challenges marketing the unusual vegetables to consumers, but once they try them, either as part of a CSA share or as a sample of fresh kohlrabi at the market, they come back for more.

"At first we had a hard time selling tatsoi [spinach mustard] or napa cabbage to anyone else but ethnic Chinese people in the summer, but at winter market, people were more brave about trying something when there weren't as many choices. Now we're selling a lot more of those things in the fall," Garrison said.

Garrison and Chang have been so successful selling Asian crops that they are planning an Asian vegetable CSA share, intended to serve the large Asian student population at Cornell, in addition to faculty members.

Provided by Cornell University

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