

# Niche Crops

**Wednesday afternoon 2:00 pm**

**Where:** Gallery Overlook (upper level) Room C & D

**MI Recertification credits:** 2 (1B, COMM CORE, PRIV CORE)

**CCA Credits:** CM(2.0)

**Moderator:** John Krohn, Ingham County Land Bank, Lansing, MI

- 2:00 pm      New Fruit Crops That 'Haskap-Tured' People's Interest
- Evan Elford, New Crop Development Specialist, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Simcoe, Ontario, Canada
- 2:30 pm      From Roots to Shoots: Opportunities in Specialty Vegetable Production
- Evan Elford, New Crop Development Specialist, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Simcoe, Ontario, Canada
- 3:00 pm      Indian and Nepalese Vegetable Farms and Markets
- Daniel Brainard, Horticulture Dept., MSU
- 3:30 pm      How Do I Know What to Grow?
- Ron Goldy, Senior Vegetable Educator, MSU Extension, Benton Harbor, MI
- 4:00 pm      Session Ends

# How Do I Know What to Grow?

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Determining what and how much to produce is not an easy task for any crop let alone specialty or niche crops. Producers of mainline crops generally have a history of production (either theirs or others) they can rely on to predict future sales. However, specialty crops by their nature have a short, or many times, no history of production. So how do you know what to grow? There is no way to eliminate all risk but there are ways to help reduce it. Determining what specialty crop/s to grow takes some effort and time so winter is a good time to start.

## **Talk to your customers:**

This seems obvious but many times we ignore the obvious. It takes effort and perhaps that is why we don't do it and when customers are around you are busy selling what you have, not worrying about what you could sell. If you are a direct marketer, talk directly to the consumer or chef but if you use a broker, then your broker is your customer. Ask the following questions:

What **can't** you get that you would like to have?

What **can** you get, but supply is inconsistent or always short?

What **can** you get, but the quality is questionable?

Having the answers to these questions gives an indication of at least what to grow; amount is still possibly an unknown. Start small for the first year as you continue to explore the market and perhaps learn how to grow the crop.

## **Find out your potential customers:**

This is harder than talking to customers. When you talk to customers you talk to an existing market, but how do you determine customers you could reach if you were to add products they might want? In other words; How do you talk to customers you don't have to find out what they want? This is where a cold call, an internet connection and MarketMaker (<https://mi.foodmarketmaker.com/>) can help. According to MarketMakers' web page:

“MarketMaker is a national network of states that connect farmers and fishermen with food retailers, grocery stores, processors, caterers, chefs, and consumers. It is an ever-growing partnership of Land Grant Universities, Departments of Agriculture, and food and agricultural organizations investing in a coordinated effort to build a virtual infrastructure that brings healthier, fresher, and more flavorful food to the average consumer.”

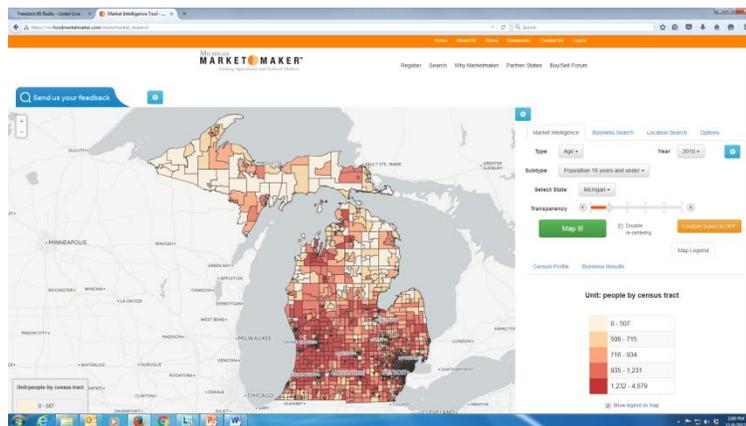


Figure 1. Opening page for beginning a search of the Michigan census data.

Once on the web site click “Search” and then click “Research Your Market Now”. This will take you to Figure 1. Going to this web page allows you to access the United States Department of Commerce Bureau of Census Data. The divisions you see on the map are the census tract divisions used by the Census Bureau in reporting their numbers. Click and hold on the map and then

center the map on the area you want and then click on the plus (+) sign on the upper left until you get the area to the size you want. You may have to click and drag a couple times while centering. Once you get the desired size and area, click the small box with “disable re-centering” next to it. This will keep the map set on the area you select rather than going back to the full state view each time you initiate a new search.

Once on this page you can use the “Type” and “Subtype” drop down menus to search the following areas:

- Type:
- Age
  - Household type
  - Race
  - Income
  - Education
  - Foreign born
  - Food preferences

Subtype: These options change as you change your Type selection.

Since “Subtype” changes based on what you select for “Type”, click on “Type” and select that demographic first, then go to “Subtype”. You can do a demographic search of those areas closest to your market or those commuting past, or the area surrounding any farmer’s market where you sell. Having this information helps make production decisions but also helps with marketing ideas. Families with children under 18 is one demographic you can search, and if you find it a major group in your area they will have different needs than young, single professionals. You should market to the needs of your customers but to do that you need to be able to identify who they are or who they might be.

If you identify a significant foreign-born population, you need to take another step. Many new immigrants have difficulty finding food items they are used to in their home country. One way to find out what they had at home is to do a Google image search. Simply go to Google, click on the “Images” tab and then type in a major city of that country followed by “produce market” or “farmer’s market” and look at the images that come up. There will be many things you recognize such as tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, etc. What you will notice is that those are peppers but they aren’t green bell peppers. You need to find out what kind of peppers they are and grow those. You will also notice that for most of the rest of the world a purple, pear-shaped eggplant is not what they want. Many are looking for a round, green and white or purple and white striped eggplant. Get some and grow it! The production practices are no different so you already know how to grow what they want; you just need a different variety. This is true for many other vegetable items. Many of the leafy greens you will see are cabbage, lettuce or melon relatives and have similar production characteristics.

By looking at the images you will also get ideas on displays. You will often see produce displayed in circular patterns and research indicates humans are attracted to circles. We also like colors broken up – intersperse your reds, yellows and greens.

Another thing to consider when producing specialty crops is that many times today’s specialty crop is tomorrow’s commodity crop. So you will always need to be looking for the next best thing and to do that you will probably have many “misses” to make a “hit”.

### **Seed sources for specialty vegetable crops:**

<http://www.johnnyseeds.com>

<http://www.evergreenseeds.com/>

<http://www.kitazawaseed.com/>

<http://www.gourmetseed.com/>