Production and Marketing Crops to the Portuguese-Speaking Peoples in Massachusetts

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Introduction

In Massachusetts, over 1,200 farmers use over 20,000 acres to produce diversified vegetable and small fruit crops. The acreage of cropland in vegetables ranks third, after land used for hay and silage corn. The farm-gate value of vegetables and small fruits ranges from about $ 2,000 per acre for relatively low-value crops like sweet corn or potato, to upwards of $ 20,000 per acre for high value fruit, tomato, or specialty vegetables. With an average crop value of $ 4,000, the value of the vegetable and berry industry is over $ 80 million, equivalent to a retail value of over $ 200 million.

Direct marketing through farm-stands, farmer's markets, pick-your-own and community-supported agriculture accounts for more than half of the marketing of fresh produce, with the remainder sold through wholesale channels or for processing. One of the strengths of the industry derives from its access to and response to urban consumers, including culturally and ethnically diverse populations.

Latinos are now the largest ethnic minority in the state, outnumbering African-Americans, with 6.8% of the population. Asians are expected to reach 4% of the population by 2010. With the growing ethnic

Table 1 Estimates of Portuguese-speaking persons in Massachusetts and in the countries of origin.

	Location				
Group	*Portugal*	*Azores*	*Cape Verde*	*Brazil*	*Mass.*
Portuguese	10,000,000	237,000			313,345[1]
Cape Verdean			450,000		51,768[1]
Brazilian				171,000,000	200,000[2]

[1] 2000 US Census
[2] Estimate by Brazilian consulate in Boston

diversity in the State, growers are interested in learning more about crops that can be grown to meet these new and expanding markets. These ethnic groups want to eat vegetables that are part of their culture. This matches the needs of farmers who are searching for new marketing options, especially for direct sales and high-value crops.

Collaborative projects have been initiated in Massachusetts to research, produce, and market products used by Latinos and Asians. These projects have been implemented by UMass Extension, the Mass. Department of Food and Agriculture, Tufts University, The New England Vegetable and Berry Growers Association, the USDA Farm Service Agency, and the Federation of Massachusetts Farmers' Markets, among other organizations.

Jiló (*Solanum gilo*), a polular crop with Brazilians, at the UMass Research Station in Deerfield, Mass. (Foto by Frank Mangan)

New Emphasis on Portuguese-speaking groups in Massachusetts

Efforts are now underway to investigate crops that are used by the Portuguese-speaking populations in Massachusetts. The Portuguese language and the culture of Portuguese-speaking peoples have a long and influential history in Massachusetts. This started with the arrival of Portuguese, mostly from the Azores, and continued with Cape Verdeans, and most recently there has been a tremendous influx of Brazilians. (See Table 1 for current estimates of Portuguese-speaking groups in Massachusetts and the countries of origin.)

Portugal Immigration

Most of the people from Portugal that immigrated to Massachusetts were from the Azores, which is an archipelago of nine islands located 1,600 km west of mainland Europe. The whaling industry in the New World was the first significant draw of Portuguese to the Americas. Whaling ships out of New Bedford and Nantucket Massachusetts would stop in the Azores to pick up supplies and sailors. During the last two to three decades of the nineteenth century, as the whaling industry diminished and industrialization

became a more important component of urban growth, Portuguese immigration increased significantly. New immigrants were attracted by employment in the textile factories in the industrial towns of southeastern New England. New Bedford was eventually known as the "Portuguese capital of the United States."

Cape Verde Immigration

Cape Verde is an archipelago of nine inhabited islands off the coast of West Africa. From their discovery around 1460 until 1975, the islands were a Portuguese colony. Similar to the immigration of Portuguese to Massachusetts, the immigration of Cape Verdeans was initiated by the whaling industry. Often times, the Cape Verdean population was not distinguished from Portuguese immigrants, so the impact of their early immigration is less well known. This immigration continued after the whaling days due to increased jobs and droughts and downturns in the Cape Verdean economy.

Brazilian Immigration

There has been a large influx of Brazilians to Massachusetts in the last few years. Exact numbers are hard to quantify, as is the case with many new immigrant groups, due to such reasons as language barriers, mistrust of governments, and legal status. The fact that this is a relatively new immigrant group suggests that there could be greater opportunities for marketing of locally-grown produce that do not already exist with more established immigrant groups that have well-entrenched distribution systems.

Current populations

The Portuguese language and culture of Portuguese-speaking groups are very much alive in Massachusetts. In 2002, the Mayors Office of New Bedford estimates that 60% of the population is of Portuguese descent and that currently 27% of the population speaks Portuguese. The Fall River school districts states that almost 6% of the population in Pre-K through Grade 12 are native speakers of Portuguese and the number is rising, due mainly to an influx of Brazilians. The Consulate General of Brazil in Boston estimates that there are over 200,000 Brazilians in Massachusetts, and this population is growing.

Crop Production and Marketing

In the case of Portuguese crops, there are many farmers, especially in Southeastern Massachusetts, who are Portuguese or of Portuguese descent, and have been growing and marketing crops popular in their cuisine. Examples are

kale (*Brassica oleracea*) and fava beans (*Vicia faba*).

A focus of this initiative will be placed on crops used by Brazilians since this is a more recent immigrant group and there appear to be certain crops that are not commonly found in their local markets.

An important part of this project is to identify crops and varieties that can be grown in Massachusetts. Despite the fact that much of Brazil is in the tropics, many of the crops used in their cuisine can be grown successfully in Massachusetts. Many of the important vegetable crops that are staples in Massachusetts are originally from the tropics, such as sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers, and many others.

However there are some crops popular among Brazilians that cannot be grown here. For example, cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) is an extremely popular crop in Brazil; however, it cannot be grown in Massachusetts since it needs a minimum of six months of a frost-free growing period.

Maxixi on a farm in Dracut, Massachusetts (Foto by Frank Mangan)

A preliminary marketing analysis of Brazilian markets has documented several vegetables that are used in Brazilian cuisine that can be grown locally. One of the more promising crops for this initiative is called *jiló*. This crop is originally from West Africa and came to Brazil with the slave trade. Another is maxixi, which is a type of cucumber.

There are also some processed agricultural products that are popular among Brazilians that hold promise for value added production in Massachusetts. For example, *curau* (also known as *mingau de milho verde* or "*pap de milho verde*) is a very popular desert that is made from corn (*milho verde*).

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