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WHAT ARE THE BEST SELLING PRODUCE ITEMS IMPORTED FROM OVERSEAS TO MIAMI-DADE COUNTY? CAN THEY BE PRODUCED HERE?

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Abstract. A list of 135 produce importers in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties in Florida was obtained from the Blue Book. A survey was designed and then sent to these importers to identify four vegetables, four fruits, and four root and tuber items with the most demand that they are currently importing. Also, the importers were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of importing produce in comparison to purchasing Florida-grown produce. Government regulations and shipping problems were mentioned as disadvantages of importing produce. A longer production season and more volume were mentioned as advantages of importing produce into the United States. Mango, papaya, asparagus, and ginger were among the fruits, vegetables, and roots and tubers that were most in demand. When the importers were asked if their buyers prefer Florida-grown produce over imported produce, 75% of them expressed the opinion that at the importer and wholesaler levels this was not an issue. In addition, 19% thought it

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was important for importers and wholesalers to know the origin of the produce while 6% were unsure about this issue.

The total values of U.S. agricultural exports exceed those of imports. However, this is not the case with fresh vegetables, which show a considerable export deficit. In 2003, the United States imported a total value of \$2.99 billion worth of fresh vegetables in comparison with \$1.32 billion of U.S. exports (USDA, FAS, 2004). There is a clear positive trend of increasing imported fresh vegetables in the United States to satisfy domestic demand (Fig. 1).

Lower production costs, availability of reliable postharvest technology, and reasonable freight costs have made it easier for growers in foreign countries to export horticultural products to the United States. While growers of fresh produce in other countries are expanding their export markets, most growers in the United States are facing considerable challenges, such as higher production costs and more stringent environmental regulations, which do not allow them to compete with their foreign counterparts.

In recent years the increase in ethnic populations in the United States and the preference among some American consumers to purchase only locally grown produce have created niche market opportunities for growers to explore.

Miami-Dade County has a thriving agricultural industry, with a total economic impact of \$1.8 billion in 1997-1998 (Stevens, 2002). The traditional and tropical vegetable industry is the largest contributor to this total impact. Growers in Miami-Dade County are always looking for alternative crops and products to diversify their production. To satisfy the demand for alternative crops, information is needed to identify the imported produce items most in demand and to investigate whether these items could be produced under Miami-Dade County's growing conditions. Information will be provided for further consideration.

Materials and Methods

Using the electronic version of the Blue Book (Produce Reporter Co., 2004), a search was conducted to generate a list of all the produce wholesalers, packers, shippers, and brokers in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties in Florida that import produce into the United States. A list of 135 companies was obtained. A survey questionnaire was designed and sent to

selected produce importers with two objectives: (1) to identify the produce items most commonly imported into Miami-Dade and Broward Counties and (2) to determine if these importers would be willing to contact Miami-Dade County growers and consider doing business with them.

To improve the response rate, importers were also contacted by telephone. A total of 34 importers (24%) responded to the survey. The collected data were summarized and tabulated for reporting the results.

Results

Importers were asked how many years they had worked in the produce business and how many years in importing produce. The average number of years was 18 and 12 years, respectively. The survey contained questions about the advantages and disadvantages of importing produce over buying Florida-grown produce. Of those responding, 68% thought that Florida does not produce the items they import, 41% said that there is a longer production season in countries producing the imported products, and 31% cited cheaper prices as the advantages of importing, while 68% identified shipping problems and 53% considered government inspection of produce entering the country as the disadvantages of importing.

When the importers were asked if their buyers prefer Florida-grown produce over imported produce, 75% of them expressed the opinion that at the importer and wholesaler levels this was not an issue. In addition, 19% thought it was important for importers and wholesalers to know the origin of the produce while 6% were unsure whether this was an issue.

The produce importers were asked to identify from the produce items they import four fruits, four vegetables, and four root and tuber items with the most demand. Of those responding, 63% identified mango, followed by papaya (34%) and raspberry and blueberry (25% each). For imported vegetable items with the most demand, 34% identified asparagus, followed by oriental vegetables (28%), snow peas (19%), and sugar snap peas (16%). For the imported roots and tubers with the most demand, 41% identified ginger root, followed by cassava, malanga, and taro root (28% each).

When the produce importers were asked if they are familiar with or have visited agricultural production in the Miami-Dade County area, 70% of them responded that they had. The importers were also asked if they would like to do business with the growers and packers in Miami-Dade County, 56% responded positively.

Economic value of the top fruits, vegetables, and roots and tubers imported into Miami-Dade and Broward Counties. Mango, papaya, asparagus, and ginger root were considered by importers to be most in demand among fruits, vegetables, and roots, respectively. Table 1 shows the volume and value of papayas imported into the United States between 1999 and 2003. In 2003, papaya imports reached an all-time high, with a total volume of 101,868 metric tons (t). In 2003, there was a 37% increase in volume and 53% increase in value of imported pa-

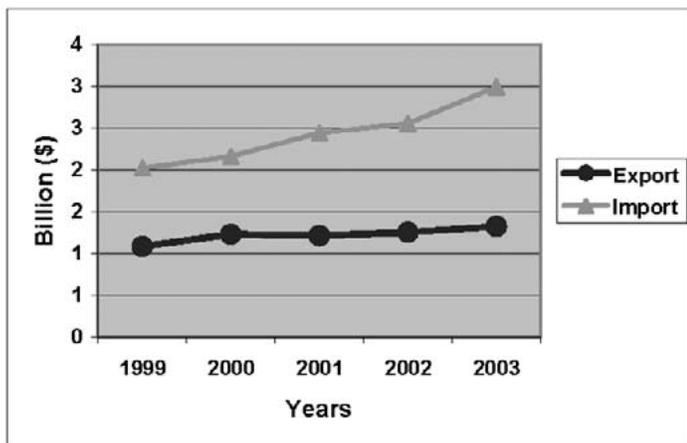


Fig. 1. Values of U.S. imports and exports of fresh vegetables, 1999-2003.

Table 1. Total volume and value of U.S. imported papayas, 1999-2003.

Total imports	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Volume (t)	66,479	69,887	84,441	88,525	101,868
Value (\$million)	44.5	46.6	54.7	58.3	60.8

Table 2. Total volume and value of U.S. imported asparagus 1999-2003.

Total imports	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Volume (t)	53,575	62,787	58,759	68,270	83,010
Value (\$million)	93.8	102.3	100.1	115.3	128.5

payas compared to 1999. In 2003, the total value of imported papayas was \$60.8 million (FAS, USDA, 2004).

Table 2 shows the volume and value of asparagus imported into the United States between 1999 and 2003. In 2003, the United States imported 83,010 t of fresh asparagus, with a total value of \$128.5 million. The volume of imported asparagus increased by 22% in 2003 from that in 2002.

Table 3 shows the total value and volume of imported fresh ginger root between 1999 and 2003. Although in 2003 the volume of imported fresh ginger reached a record high of 26,103 t, prices remained lower than in 2000, when the total value was \$15.3 million. There was a 71% increase in the volume of imported ginger between 1999 and 2003.

Table 3. Total Volume and value of U.S. imported ginger 1999-2003.

Total imports	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Volume (t)	15,277	18,682	18,053	20,099	26,103
Value (\$million)	13.9	15.3	12.4	11.8	14.3

Conclusions

Most importers surveyed have extensive produce experience. Very few mentioned poorer produce quality as a disadvantage of imports. This indicates that imported produce met the quality standards of the United States. Shipping problems and government inspections were considered the two major disadvantages of importing to the United States. Survey results showed that the origin of produce is not an issue among importers. Sixty-eight percent of the importers surveyed thought that Florida does not produce the items they import. There is a need to investigate whether Florida has the growing conditions required to produce the items mentioned by the importers and whether the items can be produced profitably in Florida. This survey revealed that 53% of the importers would like to meet Miami-Dade County growers and packers. A list of growers and packers in Miami-Dade County was sent to all importers interested in making contact.

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