



NORTHEAST REGIONAL

# Food Guide

## Regional Agriculture, International Cuisines

When people think about agriculture in the Northeast, they often imagine traditional regional products like those that go into a Thanksgiving meal—turkey, squash, potatoes, cranberries, corn, and green beans. Or they may think that eating seasonally and regionally is to eat more like northeasterners from a century ago, with local beef, pork, and poultry, local dairy products, and homegrown fruits and vegetables like tomatoes, carrots, onions, garlic, squash, spinach, apples, and grapes.

Eating seasonally and regionally is one way to stay in touch with our historical traditions, but it does not mean giving up the world cuisines that many of us enjoy, such as Asian-style stir-fries, Caribbean curries, or hearty Latin American fare. The cultural diversity of the Northeast means that we are more likely to have access to authentic ingredients with the freshness and quality that only regional growers can provide.

### A Diverse Market, a Diversifying Agriculture

Owing to recent immigration, the cultural backgrounds of the people of the Northeast are extraordinarily diverse. Innovative farmers are forging connections with this customer base, learning from them about the varieties they most hope to see and how best to market them. Some of those farmers are members of recently arrived ethnic communities and may have extensive experience in growing these crops. Public universities and nonprofit organizations in the Northeast offer programs for new and immigrant farmers.

Janet Bachman, an agricultural specialist at the National Center for Appropriate Technology and a market gardener, describes a collaborative relationship she developed with her customers. She writes:

“One couple from Bangladesh, who shop at the Fayetteville Farmers’ Market, appreciated the varieties of eggplants that I grew, and asked me whether I would be interested in trying to grow other Asian vegetables. The next year they not only provided seed for a dozen different vegetables, but also came out to my farm to give me advice on planting, harvesting, and cooking. Ridge gourd, bitter melon, wax gourd, winter melon, yard long bean, hyacinth bean, amaranth greens, and kangkong or water spinach were among the new introductions to my garden. A Chinese-American friend told me her mother in California liked to buy bunches of garlic-chive flower bud stalks. Sure enough, when I took some of these to the farmers’ market, our Chinese customers soon noticed them. After I tried the chives myself, chopped up into a stir fry or stew, I was able to rave about them to any customer who showed the slightest interest. A woman from India, upon learning that I was willing to try new things, subsequently brought me seed for her favorite eggplant variety and a number of Indian legumes. Furthermore, these customers helped me market the produce by telling their friends. What a wonderful way to develop grower-consumer relationships!”<sup>1</sup>

## The World at Your Local Farmers' Market

Most specialty "ethnic" products are simply new varieties of crops that have long been staples at farmers' markets: Chinese eggplant, calabaza squash, Thai basil, cubanelle peppers, daikon radish, and various mushrooms. Greens like amaranth, bok choy, and Simpson lettuce (lechuga del monte) are available in the cooler months of the spring and fall, while solanaceous crops like peppers, Asian eggplants, and tomatillos mature later in the summer. Herbs such as Thai basil and recaon (a variety of cilantro popular in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic) can grow well in the summer months and are necessary for achieving the authentic flavor of ethnic cuisines.

While it's exciting to think of new products that originated in faraway places, many vegetables already grown in the Northeast originated from southern Mexico, South America, or Central America. These include tomatoes, peppers, cucurbits (squash, pumpkins, cucumbers, and zucchini), beans, peas, and sweet corn.<sup>2</sup> Cabbages originally came from the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor, and spinach originated in Africa.

So, look for some of the less common products in your area and try them out in your kitchen. If you want to have access to certain products in their freshest state, don't hesitate to approach a farmer about growing the crop. Many farmers are eager to hear from shoppers. Agriculture in the Northeast, like agriculture anywhere, reflects the regional population. As our population grows in diversity, so does local farming.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bachman. "Current Topic: Specialty Vegetables." *Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas*, March 2002.

<sup>2</sup> F. Mangan and A. Carter, Department of Soil and Plant Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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