

Direct Market Potential of Five Heirloom Dry Bean Varieties

Farmers who market their products directly to the consumer are continuously challenged to find innovative methods of attracting new customers and maintaining the interest of their current consumers. New products that appeal to consumers' personal health, social, and budgetary concerns are important for direct market producers to keep their businesses sustainable. This project studied the market potential of five colorful heirloom dry bean varieties. The beans were bred for excellent yields, resistance to diseases and insects, and attractive color patterns that protect them from price competition with generic bean varieties. The beans can be grown under low-input conditions-such as organic-and offer innovative opportunities for producers to deliver greater food choices, particularly during the winter time. Producers and consumers from the North Coast, Yolo County, and the San Francisco Bay Area were surveyed to determine the potential to produce and market these specialty beans. Five producers were further involved in growing test seed and evaluating the beans based on the yields they achieved and production problems they faced. The study helped determine which varieties producers are able to grow well and which varieties are most appealing to consumers.

Study Results:

- The study determined that the heirloom dry beans are a viable product for both the producer and the consumer. The consumer is interested in products that are nutritious and non-perishable, a perfect fit for beans.
- Surveying of consumers at the three regional farmers markets and through flyers inserted into CSA subscription boxes showed that more than 50% were "very interested" in buying two of the bean varieties, Jacob's Cattle and Holstein.

Consumers reported that the nutritional value of a product was the most important attribute to consumers, a sentiment commonly overlooked by producers. Survey data also show that previous experience with a product is not as important to consumers as producers believe. "Locally grown" and "organic" were important attributes to consumers that producers understood and included in their marketing strategies. Producers who direct market products need to highlight the attributes important to consumers (nutritional value, locally and organically grown) in their marketing materials, on their packaging and when they are talking to consumers.

- Producer surveys revealed that dry bean production is relatively different than fresh vegetables and other direct market products. Planting and cultivation practices are similar to what producers normally do, but harvesting and threshing the beans was a new experience. Harvesting the beans also typically occurred when the farmer was busy tending to other fall



crops. In general, pest and disease problems were low. Farmers did experience difficulty with location-specific problems, such as soil compatibility and temperature fluctuations.

- Producers who grew the beans for two years in a row were able to increase their yields substantially during the second growing season. This signifies that bean production can be easily taken up and adapted by farmers to suit their needs.

Project Impacts:

- In addition to the surveys and visits to farmers markets to promote dry beans, the project staff also put on two “Bean Basics” workshops for consumers in Woodland, CA. Thirty-five participants, including five men and several minorities, learned about dry bean production in California and the importance of beans in our diet. Participants learned how to cook dry beans and left with several recipes.
- Diane Metz published a county publication titled “Bean Basics” and over 450 copies were distributed to consumers at farmers markets and in CSA boxes. The book has information on the nutritional value of beans as well as recipes that use different type of beans.



Next Steps:

- The next focus of the project will be to write a peer-reviewed publication summarizing the research results to further extend information to other communities.

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