

Engaging South Asian Growers and Customers in Fresh Vegetable Production



A popular Bengali-owned grocery store in East New York.

East New York is home to a vibrant community of gardeners, many of whom carry practices and wisdom from their home countries in South Asia. While the majority of these gardeners grow vegetables for their own families, this guide seeks to support gardeners seeking to enter the local market and provide fresh, seasonal produce for South Asian consumers. This guide presents results from a survey of 40 local growers, including information about commonly grown vegetables, growing spaces, and grower limitations, as well as results from a consumer survey that looks at market participation trends. We hope that these findings and recommendations can further connect South Asian growers in East New York with local farmers' markets. We also hope that this report will help facilitate more connections between growers and customers to help expand the market for South Asian crops in the Northeast.

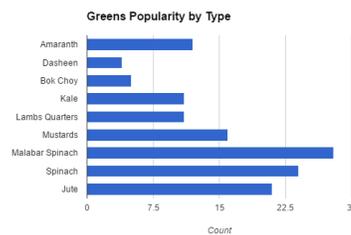
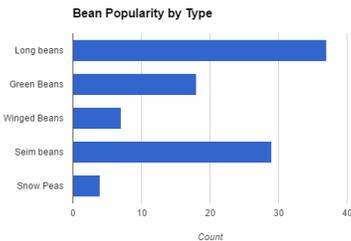


This backyard garden has an understory of dasheen and other leafy greens, and a canopy of trellised vining gourds and beans

Grower Trends

The growers who participated in our survey were found through information collected at one of our compost giveaway events. All of these gardeners grew in their backyards rather than in community gardens, using spaces ranging from 50 ft² to 1800 ft². This space limitation forces gardeners to create innovative and efficient growing systems that take advantage of vertical space.

8% of gardeners already grow to sell, and another 15% said they were interested in selling at a farmers markets, but the vast majority of gardeners grow only for their families (92%) and are uninterested in selling at a farmers market (85%). 27.5% of gardeners had been growing for 2-5 years, 35% for 6-9 years, and 37.5% for over 10 years.



Over 90% of gardeners grow tomatoes, long purple eggplant, peppers, beans, peas, gourds (specifically bitter melon, bottle gourd, and luffa), pumpkin, squash, cucumber, greens, and cilantro. Around 50% grew scallions, turnips, carrots, radishes, and okra, and around 20% grew cabbage, onions, garlic, beets, and sweet potatoes. The charts included here show a breakdown of bean and green popularity by type among growers. Most growers are producing at least three types of beans and greens in their gardens.

The needs that came up as the most important to growers were, in order of importance: 1) Access to seeds and growing material, 2) access to trellising materials including nets and posts, 3) access to growing space, 4) soil and fertilizer, and 5) access to water.



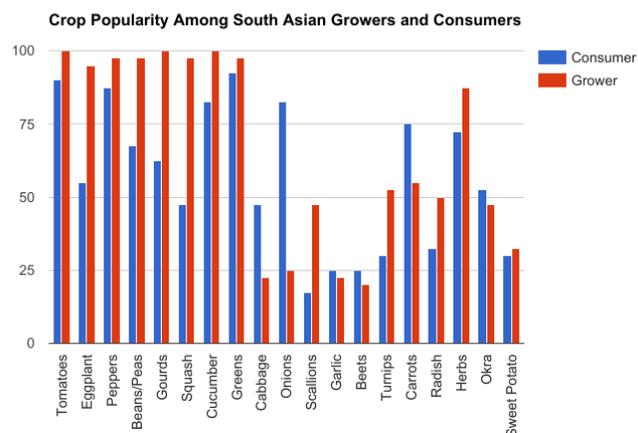
A Bengali grower standing next to her vining gourd crop.

Market Participation Trends among Consumers

For the consumer surveys, twenty were conducted at three farmers markets in Queens and Brooklyn, ten were conducted at green grocers in East New York, and ten at South Asian owned supermarkets in East New York.

The vast majority of consumers engaged in one food shopping trip per week. All participants regularly shopped at the supermarket, around 70% shopped at convenience stores or bodegas, and around 50% frequented farmers markets and bulk stores. The reasons for choosing these locations are listed here in order of importance: the selection and quality of produce offered, the convenience of the location, low prices, and community participation. The majority of shoppers purchase for 4-6 people and 50-79% of the produce they eat is fresh, as opposed to frozen, dried, or canned.

The majority of shoppers who were surveyed at farmers markets heard about them through their friends or family. Their favorite components of the farmers markets were, in order of popularity: variety and freshness of produce, and affordability of merchandise. The most popular requests for improvement of food shopping centers (general category) were: more local, fresh, organic produce, availability of more South Asian spices and produce, greater variety of peppers, and availability of fruits, honey, and fresh bread. The most common requests for farmers market specifically were Bengali translators and expanded market hours and days per week.



Many of the crops included in our surveys share a similar popularity between consumers and growers. Figure 4 shows a comparison of crop popular between consumers and growers. One notable thing about this data is that consumers listed specialty ethnic crops, including beans, gourds, and squash, as something that they purchase with much less frequency than the rate that local gardeners choose to grow them. This may be the result of the lack of availability of these specialty crops in food shopping centers.

Recommendations

Our surveys found that there is a base of South Asian consumers that are dissatisfied with the availability of fresh, culturally appropriate produce offered in East New York, and an accompanying population of South Asian growers that are producing these sought after crops for the consumption of their own families.



Some of produce offered at this grocery store could be sourced locally. We hope to support the pathways to make that happen.

Future research efforts should focus on understanding the reason that local growers are not interested in selling at market. Possible reasons include limitation of growing space, economic unviability, time constraints, lack of awareness of selling opportunities, and lack of social connectedness to local farmers markets. One way that the final reason might initially be addressed at farmers markets is by having Bengali and Hindi translations of signs, encouraging South Asian vendors to have stands. Specifically at our East New York Farmers Market, we can hire youth interns that speak Bengali and can act as translators for market interactions.

In terms of gardener support, almost all of the needs that came up for the gardeners surveyed are resources that we provide at East New York Farms!, however the outreach that is done for our resource giveaway events, workshops, and our mini-grant application process are all conducted in English. Offering translated materials and interpretation at workshops, possibly through a partnership with a local South Asian cultural-based organization, would make these services more accessible to South Asian growers and would help to foster a sense of camaraderie and trust between the South Asian gardener community and our network of gardeners and market vendors. Any opportunities for building partnerships between South Asian culturally-based organizations and organizations that support urban gardening and local food systems is crucial for increasing the participation of South Asian consumers and growers in farmers markets.