Niche Products Give Grower an Edge

*Michael Buchanan’s crops supply a special market*

Interview with Michael Buchanan
Vegetable grower

*Despite the sometimes long hours, hard work and uncertain rewards, there will always be people willing to take up the challenge of farming. Jamaican native Michael Buchanan, who learned how to farm from his parents, is one of Connecticut’s newest farmers, working rented land at Bloomfield’s 4-H Education Center at Auer Farm and in South Windsor.*

*Buchanan practices good niche marketing, selling his ethnic-flavored crops in the Hartford area primarily through farmer’s markets and grocery outlets.*

Independent grower draws from his roots

I grew up in a farming community, rural Jamaica. My mother and my father were farmers, so I would help out on the farm. I’d have my plot and it all grew from there. I was always involved in some form of farming activities for most of my life.

This is actually my first season here. For this year I did somewhere between a half acre and a quarter acre at Auer farm, that’s a 4-H farm. There were another three acres that I took up over in South Windsor. There was option for more land, but I stuck with what I could manage. It’s not quite fulltime in the season, but I’m heading there.

One of my things is to get my produce to my customers in the freshest state possible, a few hours to twenty-four hours, so it’s vital. We get that vitality and that gives me some edge in my local area over the supermarkets. I’m also looking to finding niche products that will appeal to different tastes, wherever they are.

My most popular crop is calaloo, which is an amaranth used by Caribbean people, African peoples and a few other ethnic groups. That’s my main thing. Then scotch bonnet peppers, which are also a great thing. Those are my two main crops right now. There are also tomatillos, beans, thyme, and so on.

Much of my produce can now be found in supermarkets and small stores around. There are a few restaurants. Most of my crops are sold in the greater Hartford area where there’s a large Caribbean-Jamaican population. There are populations out there that are looking out for products of their own ethnic origins, as well as others who like the exotics.

I do attend, or attended, a farmer’s market run by the Hartford Food System on Laurel Street. My markets were mainly to Jamaicans, but then there were all the ethnicities that were quite interested in my produce. The farmer’s market, apart from being a good opportunity for sales and
marketing, is a good social spot. You meet such nice people. You’re able to exchange all kinds of ideas.

Accepting the challenges is the key to good farming

There are ready markets, and it mainly depends on how can you step up to meet a market type. What are your resources, is your transportation good?

Small farmers in Jamaica, they rely on each other. There is shared labor, so one farmer would be doing a particular job today, and he’d have six, seven, eight, nine, two dozen farmers come over depending on the size of the job and help. Then another day, when their crop challenge comes on that farmer, along with others, goes to another farmer’s plot and helps. Here, people are much more busy about their personal lives and their job, and it’s a little different.

I’d say I broke even, which for many farmers in their first year, might be hard. But there’s room for growth, I’d say. I do accept the challenges.

The key to being a good farmer is being able to balance your resources with your production, to maximize your gains. That’s the whole big question there. But the main thing is to be able to produce. The main thing is to be able to produce what you can with what you have, and to work with your challenges, your environment, to focus on the markets you want and that are receptive to you. That’s basically it.

I enjoy a lot in farming, a lot of aspects. One is being in residence with nature. Another is being able to produce crops that are being demanded and to be rewarded for it.