

IMPROVING MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES FOR 'VIRGIN FRESH' PRODUCTS FY 2008

Traditionally crop producers in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) have limited the marketing of herbs to road side stands and farmers' markets. These farmers have not taken advantage of more lucrative markets for their commodities, including the hospitality industry which serves not only the resident population, but an annual 2.6 million visitors to the USVI. The following factors were identified as constraints for producers:

- lack of information regarding improved market opportunities
- lack of knowledge and experience in market planning and coordinating
- lack of farm to market networks
- lack of consistent supply for market demand

The goal of this project was to create a pilot marketing system that addresses the "Virgin Fresh" Products supply and demand information barriers between producers and buyers, and to create a model distribution system to address the barriers to the ordering, pick-up, and delivery of 'Virgin Fresh' Products from producers to buyers. The Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA) chose this project to bring awareness and boost the culinary herbs market in the Territory. VIDA has been able to determine challenges faced and strategically plan to support the continued effort to create a market in which locally-grown culinary herbs are readily available.

FINAL REPORT

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USDA-AMS Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program Final Report

U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture's (VIDA) Project: Improving Marketing Opportunities for '*Virgin Fresh*' Products

This report details the actions completed for the objectives set forth in the Virgin Fresh Culinary Herb Project work plan for the period from September 1, 2008 through June 30th, 2012

Objective:

To create a pilot marketing system that addresses the “Virgin Fresh’ Products supply and demand information barriers between producers and buyers, and to create a model distribution system that addresses the barriers to the ordering, pick-up, and delivery of ‘Virgin Fresh’ Products from producers to buyers.

- a) To increase knowledge level of producers regarding best production, postharvest and marketing practices for culinary herbs.
- b) Increase the number of farm to market linkages by increasing buyer/consumer awareness and stimulating demand for culinary herbs
- c) Develop a system to aggregate farmers’ weekly harvest and email/fax this list of products, quantities, and prices to potential restaurateurs, hotel food and beverage manager and supermarket buyers
- d) Develop an order placement system that allows buyers to place orders for the products they demand from the weekly harvests list; and
- e) Develop a model distribution system to pick up ordered produce from the farmer, deliver it to the distributor and have the distributor store and deliver the ordered amounts to the respective buyers.

Rationale:

VIDA chose this project as it would bring awareness and boost the culinary herbs market in the Territory. VIDA has been able to determine challenges faced and strategically plan to support the continued effort to create a market in which local culinary herbs are readily available.

Outputs:

Surveys were conducted to identify Farmers’ current methods utilized in herb production and sale. The information gathered from these were used to determine what practices are successful and / or not. Local restaurant surveys revealed that restaurateurs were interested in learning more about and using local herbs in their dishes.

a) To increase knowledge level of producers regarding best production, postharvest and marketing practices for culinary herbs.

Producer Identification, Training and Monitoring:

1. Selecting producers – VIDA engaged local producers from each island who should interest in producing culinary herbs for home and restaurant usage. Five (5) producers were chosen and successfully completed the project. These local producers worked with VIDA, during the grant period on proper production methods, effective marketing, branding and distribution. These producers would serve as a model for others also interested in this kind of crop.
2. Workshops – selected producers have attended the workshop session(s) and were given the work plan. The *Production Methods* sessions were held individually and on-farm rather than in groups due to the varying production methods required by each plot's specifications. Farm visits were made throughout the grant period. VIDA continues to follow up with these producers who have shown great progress in areas of productivity, branding and marketing.



The below listed producers participated in the *Culinary Herb Pilot Project*:

St. Croix:

- Grantley Samuel of GLG Plants and Produce – nursery/greenhouse farmer

St. Thomas:

- Benita Martin- Samuel and Jambi Samuel – experienced terrace farmers
- Alexander Cellaire – intermediate experienced terrace farmer
- The Plant Depot –gardeners and retail store
- St. John
- Thalia Reyes –beginner gardener

b) To increase the number of farm to market linkages by increasing buyer/consumer awareness and stimulating demand for culinary herbs by:



The participants have participated in local Expeditions and Food Events to showcase their products. The models continue to produce valuable information and the industry is growing as the connections are being made.

1. **“From Crucian to Gourmet”**- Food Event, hosted by Local Association (Chant Heritage, Inc.) on December 19th, 2011 on the island of St. Croix. VIDA partnered with this organization for a culinary experience featuring local recipes that incorporated local culinary herbs. Local producers were encouraged to bring goods to Chef/Farmers Market Day hosted by VIDA in support of the CHANT effort. Ten local culinary herb producers participated. There were 48 restaurateurs and/ or cooks that

also participated and the community on a whole benefited by seeing the variety of herbs available in the Territory as well as tasting them in prepared foods. Approximately 150 persons attended the event.

2. **“A Taste of St. Croix”** – VIDA has partnered with St. Croix Foundation, Inc., who hosts many culinary events during the year. Our local herb producers have participated in the premier event “A taste of St. Croix” in April of 2012. In Addition, VIDA has also partnered with “A taste of St. Croix”, to showcase local herbs and their producers at various times during the year at the new **“Farm to Table”** events. **“Farm to Table”** is a collaborative marketing effort. Restaurateurs pick a local herb to use in the preparation of a special dish. The Restaurant, the farmer and the dish are advertised in local newspapers and radio ads to bring awareness to the entire community.

3. VIDA continues to market the culinary herb producers via its radio show, “Fresh from the Farm”. Periodical updates have been made on the www.vifresh.com website to showcase events and other relative information.

4. BizVI has completed design work to update website capacity to include: harvest reports, monthly editorials and podcast gathered from events that showcase local producers.

5. VIDA has worked with Risk Management and local Agri-business professionals in preparing for workshop on crop insurance and other challenges facing local producers. During outreach with local producers it was determined that a workshop on proper reporting, forms and licenses would be most appropriate and needed. VIDA hosted first workshop in August of 2012, on the island of St. Thomas, where twenty (25) producers attended.

6. VIDA is planning an open-house on island of St. John in December 2012, which will showcase culinary herb models that illustrate successful production and distribution practices. The open house will also have information for those interested in cultivating culinary herbs for both home and commercial usages.

(c) Develop a system to aggregate farmers’ weekly harvest and email/fax this list of products, quantities, and prices to potential restaurateurs, hotel food and beverage manager and supermarket buyers

VIDA gave technical assistance to the farmers who participated in the grant project by developing a system to aggregate farmers’ weekly harvest.

The system includes:

- a) Weekly post to the farmers websites
- b) Email/ faxes to restaurateurs (see template attached)
- c) Announcements of available products on weekly radio show

This marketing strategy has greatly assisted the farmers and restaurateurs in making necessary connections while increasing sales and consumption of local herbs.

In reference to objectives:

- (d) Develop and order placement system that allows buyers to place orders for the products they demand from the weekly harvests list; and
- (e) Develop a model distribution system to pick up ordered produce from the farmer, deliver it to the distributor and have the distributor store and deliver the ordered amounts to the respective buyers.

VIDA encouraged farmers to develop an order placement system that was tailored to their individual customer, which offers flexibility. VIDA did not develop the order placement system for them, as VIDA felt the farmers would be better off developing their own relationships that could be sustained by the farmers even after the grant project ending.

VIDA also felt that the model distribution system would have been too cumbersome and endeavor and may opt to do this as a stand-alone project at another time.

In conclusion, VIDA recognized the need to improve production, marketing and distribution of culinary herbs throughout the Territory of the Virgin Islands. Culinary herbs are used in many households and in restaurant settings. Many producers have shown interest in enhancing their culinary herb production and the market possibilities are endless.

Five (5) producers have benefited from the research and information disseminated during this grant period. Over forty (40) local restaurateurs are now in contact with local herb producers.

This grant project exposed some challenges:

1. The local producers benefit more from one on one technical assistance because each producer has a unique condition.
2. The local terrain, weather conditions and pest hamper production more than originally identified and even with ability to grow year round.

VIDA will continue to engage farmers on one to one basis with increased farm visits. Connections with the University of the Virgin Islands Agricultural Research departments have been strengthened; which lends valuable production information to farmers.

The community on a whole greatly benefited from the expansion of culinary herbs production and the marketing of these. It has brought nutrition awareness as well as introduced new recipes. Due to the marketing efforts consumers are able to identify where they can purchase their culinary herbs and how they are best used. The interest has grown over the grant period and production has increased due to said demand. Two new

culinary events came about with the support of this project and hundreds of participants have been introduced to the Virgin Fresh Culinary Brand. Post project surveys revealed an increased awareness (by almost 50%) of culinary herbs and their availability in the community.

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VIRGIN FRESH
CULINARY HERBS PROJECT



LOCALLY GROWN!

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Thyme Supplied By:
**GRANTLEY SAMUEL OF
GLG PLANTS & PRODUCE
(340) 332-3932**

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Net Wt. 0.5 ounce (14 grams)

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www.VIFRESH.com



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V.I. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE***