

Spicing Up Your Veggie Market With Exotic Crops

PIKETON, Ohio — Looking to grow and market something different than tomatoes, cucumbers or peppers? How does amaranth, jute, Alaskan yard-long beans or malabar spinach grab you?

Researchers at Ohio State University's South Centers at Piketon are in their first year of organically raising such exotic crops to provide growers with alternative vegetables and cash crops that grow well in Ohio and satisfy the state's growing ethnic market.

Rafiq Islam, an Ohio State soil and water specialist, said the crops are ideal because they have a short growing season, require low maintenance, compete well against weeds and fetch a higher price than traditional vegetables.

"Most of the vegetables can be planted in May or June and harvested in September," said Islam. "Because they are high-value crops, growers can get a higher price for them and customers like them because they are high in nutrition and are what they are used to buying back home."

Amaranth, also known as edible pigweed, is one such crop that meets those characteristics. "Amaranth is fast

growing. In 35-45 days it's in full bloom and ready for harvest," said Islam. An added bonus is that some of the varieties are heat and drought tolerant.

"The leaves and stalk are edible and are high in vitamins A, B and C," said Islam. "Amaranth is also cultivated for the grain, which contains high levels of protein."

Breakfast cereals, pastas and breads containing amaranth grain or flour are available in most health food stores. Ohio State researchers are growing 17 varieties of amaranth, found in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and China.

Researchers are also seeing success with jute, a plant from India, Thailand, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh that produces a fiber used all over the world for making a variety of products such as blankets, clothing, upholstery and handbags. Jute is also used in the pharmaceutical and textile industries.

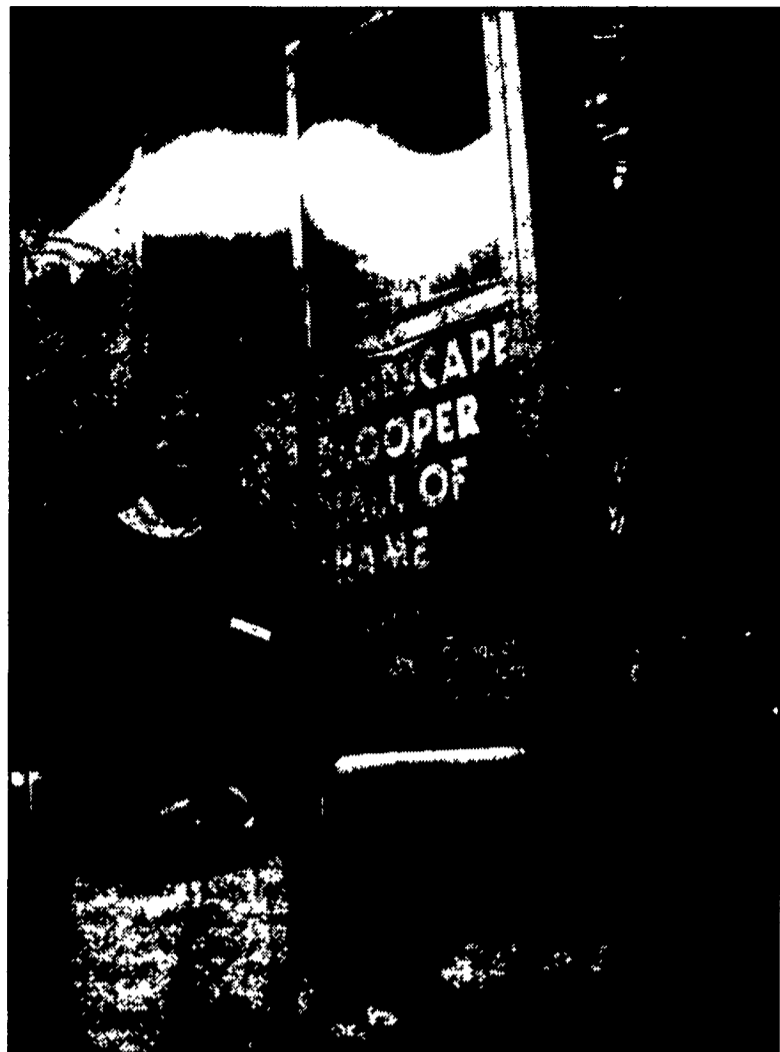
"It's a lot like hemp. It's a biodegradable product used to make products like rope and decorative wrap," said Islam. "The crop is also edible as the young shoots can be eaten."

Jute can grow as high as eight to 10 feet tall and is effective in controlling weeds. The crop is cut at the soil line and allowed to dry out. It is then bundled and fiber is extracted from the stems after they have been submerged under water and decomposed.

Malabar spinach, also known as Indian spinach, is not spinach at all, but a tropical vine that grows quickly on a wide variety of sites. The plant is cultivated for its leaves, which have high levels of vitamins A and C. Malabar spinach is originally from Africa and South East Asia.

Researchers are also growing yard-long asparagus beans, an Alaskan legume high in protein; Calabash gourd, a tropical vine whose young fruits are harvested and cooked like squash and matured fruits are used for decoration; and Luffa sponge, a plant in the same family as pumpkins and watermelons that is cultivated mainly as a bath sponge.

For more information on such alternative crops, contact Rafiq Islam at (740) 289-2071 or islam.27@osu.edu or contact Shawn Wright at (740) 289-2071 or wright.705@osu.edu.



Hort Display Enlightens Farm Show Visitors

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — Dr. Bill Lamont, associate professor of vegetable crops at Penn State, was on hand to answer questions on opening day of Farm Show this year. The 900-square-foot Penn State Horticulture Center focused on the theme, "Landscape Blooper Wall of Shame," or some of the things you shouldn't do to maintain plants.

Photo by Andy Andrews, editor

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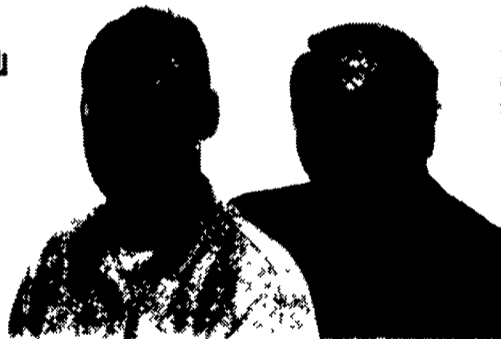
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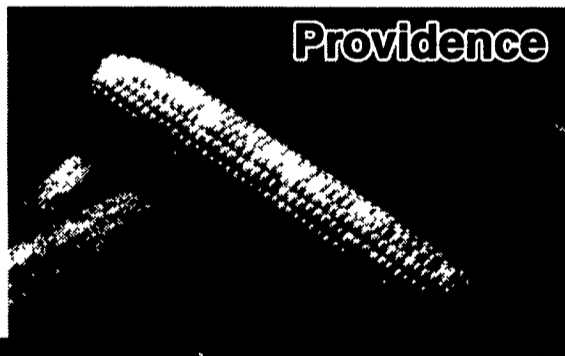
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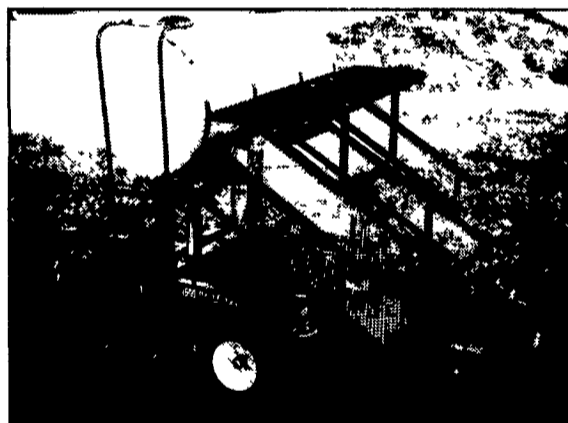


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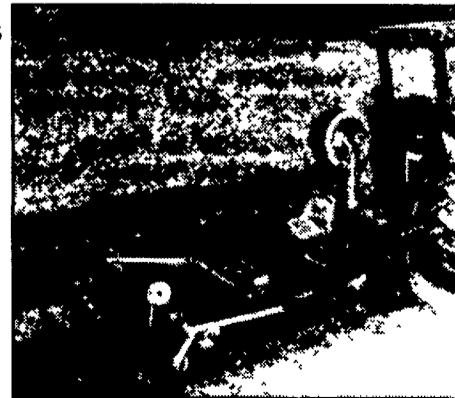
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