

## DINING

# Cook Globally, Shop Locally

World Produce Project brings international foods to farmers markets. But can it bring international custom

BY JIM SILVER  
THE CONNECTION

Asian cucumbers don't look like regular cucumbers, Chip Planck said. They're long, curvy and pimply, and when they're cut up, they're especially crunchy. Planck and his wife Susan, the owners of Wheatland Vegetable Farm in Purcellville, have been growing Asian cucumbers, Middle Eastern squash and other vegetables for about 20 years, selling the produce at local farmers markets.

Standard-issue vegetables sold well, but their overseas cousins didn't always fly off the stands.

"We grew Middle Eastern squash

10, 15 years ago, and nobody bought them," Planck said.

**THAT HAS CHANGED** this summer, since Planck began working with the Cooperative Extension offices in Arlington and Loudoun, in an effort to expand the clientele at farmers markets through the World Produce Project, offering eight "ethnic vegetables" — produce used in Asian, African and Latin American cuisines.

The farmers involved, like Planck, have been growing the vegetables for years, offering them for sale along with their other produce at farmers markets. "Some of this stuff has been grown around here, but it's not used," said Tom Tyler, organizer of the Arlington

Farmers Market for the Arlington Agricultural Extension Office.

Funded by a \$9,775 grant from the state's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, the World Produce Project will offer analyses to other Virginia farmers, letting them know what new crops they could profitably plant. The benefit for sellers like the Plancks has largely been a public-relations effort, calling shoppers' attention to the offerings at participating stands, and offering cooking demonstrations incorporating the ethnic foods.

Rather than drawing in new customers, the vegetables have gotten increased attention from farmers market regulars. "It's not the ethnic customers who are coming to get these," said Jason Murray, horticulturist for the Loudoun County Extension Office. "It's the existing customers."

They've been drawn by increased attention, said Planck. "There are more cosmopolitan groups at all markets. People are looking for spice."

**NEW SPICES AND** new tastes come from three vegetables at Haroun Hallack's Redbud Farm stand at the Columbia Pike Market.

"One is bok choy — I just started selling that yesterday," Hallack said. "One is the amaranth greens. And the habanero peppers. Hot food is not everybody's thing."

Hallack, a native of Sierra Leone, does see African immigrants coming to his stand to buy amaranth greens, broad leaves that can be cooked and served like spinach. "It's widely



PHOTO COURTESY OF KELLY LUCK

Karen Orlando, left, and chef Gloria Melendez prepare a cooking demonstration using vegetables from the World Produce Project at Orlando's restaurant, Mexicali Blues.