

USDA Definition of Specialty Crop

The purpose of this document is to facilitate coordination among the various US Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies with programs that address the needs of specialty crop producers, handlers and processors. Although a common definition of specialty crops across these agencies is desirable for USDA stakeholders and customers, it is also recognized that the mission of each agency is unique and so the application of a common definition might vary. It is also recognized that individual states may wish to modify the definition used by USDA to satisfy local or regional needs. The agencies involved in this effort were the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), the Cooperative State, Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), the Office of the Chief Economist (OCE), and the Risk Management Agency (RMA).

Specialty crops are defined in law as “fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits and horticulture and nursery crops, including floriculture.” This definition, although more exact than previous legal definitions, leaves a certain amount of latitude in interpretation. The legal definition of specialty crops is, however, intimately tied to the definition of horticulture and its various components.

Horticulture is defined as that branch of agriculture concerned with intensively cultivated plants that are used by people for food, for medicinal purposes, and for aesthetic gratification. There are two key components of this definition that differentiate horticultural crops from other crops: “intensively cultivated” and “used by people for ...”. Therefore, horticultural crops are differentiated from other crops by the level of management employed in their production and by their subsequent use. Horticultural plants are commonly divided into those that are edible, those that are used for culinary or medicinal purposes, and those that are used for ornamental or aesthetic purposes.

Horticulture is also divided into specializations. The terms used to describe these specializations derive from millennia of common usage and are sometimes at odds with botanical nomenclature. For example, vegetables are described as herbaceous plants of which some portion is eaten raw or cooked during the main part of a meal. Fruits, for horticultural purposes, are described as plants from which a more or less succulent fruit or closely related botanical structure is commonly eaten as a dessert or snack. By these definitions, plants such as tomato, squash and cucumber are considered vegetables despite the fact that the edible portion is defined botanically as a fruit. The delineation of plants by common usage was legally established in 1893 by the unanimous U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Nix vs. Hedden*.

Over the last 60 years, agriculture, including horticulture, has become increasingly reliant on science and technology to maintain profitable production. The scientific study of horticulture is divided into various sub-disciplines. Pomology is defined as that branch of horticulture dealing with fruit and tree nut production. Fruit production includes the so-called tree fruits; such as apple, peach, and orange, and small fruits; such as strawberry, blueberry, and raspberry. Olericulture is defined as that branch of horticulture dealing

with the production of vegetables and herbs. Floriculture is that branch of horticulture dealing with the production of field-grown or greenhouse-grown plants for their flowers or showy leaves. Environmental horticulture is that branch of horticulture that deals with the production of plants for ornamental use in constructed environments, both indoors and outdoors.

There are many facets to environmental horticulture. Nursery production involves growing plants under intensive management for use in another location. Nurseries are defined in a variety of ways: a) the type of plant grown, such as fruit tree, turf or Christmas tree nurseries; b) the function of the nursery, such as production, wholesale, retail, mail-order or landscape nurseries; and c) the production system, such as field-grown or container-grown. Landscape horticulture involves the design, installation, and maintenance of both outdoor and indoor environments. Public horticulture involves the design and maintenance of arboreta, public gardens, parks, and athletic facilities. Horticultural therapy involves the use of horticultural plants to improve the condition of people with physical, intellectual or emotional disabilities. Horticultural therapy also includes the use of plants in hospitals and other medical facilities to ease the pain and suffering of patients. Home horticulture involves the use of horticultural plants as a recreational activity, generally by non-professionals. Home horticulture is the most popular hobby in the United States with a commercial value of over \$35 billion in 2007.

As discussed above, specialty crops are plants that are intensively cultivated. There are many plants that are specialty crops when cultivated, but are also collected from wild populations. Wild plants are not considered specialty crops even though they may be used for the same purpose as cultivated plants. This is somewhat common among medicinal herbs and woodland plants. There are a number of native ferns that are collected from wild populations for use in the floral trade. There are also a number of marine plants that are collected from wild populations both for direct consumption and for industrial uses. Although these are specialty uses, wild plants are not considered specialty crops by USDA. However, natural populations of native plants that are brought into cultivation, such as sugar maple trees, are considered specialty crops by USDA. For the purpose of some programs in which state agencies are the eligible entities, states may choose to define plants collected from the wild as specialty crops.

The following appendices give examples of plants that are considered specialty crops by USDA. These appendices are not intended to be all-inclusive, but rather are intended to give examples of the most common members of the various groups. There has not been an attempt to list plants that are used as ornamentals.

Appendix A – List of Plants Commonly Considered Fruits and Tree Nuts

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Almond | Grape (including raisin) |
| Apple | Guava |
| Apricot | Kiwi |
| Avocado | Litchi |
| Banana | Macadamia |
| Blackberry | Mango |
| Blueberry | Nectarine |
| Breadfruit | Olive |
| Cacao | Papaya |
| Cashew | Passion fruit |
| Citrus | Peach |
| Cherimoya | Pear |
| Cherry | Pecan |
| Chestnut (for nuts) | Persimmon |
| Coconut | Pineapple |
| Coffee | Pistachio |
| Cranberry | Plum (including prune) |
| Currant | Pomegranate |
| Date | Quince |
| Feijou | Raspberry |
| Fig | Strawberry |
| Filbert (hazelnut) | Suriname cherry |
| Gooseberry | Walnut |

Appendix B – A List of Plants Commonly Considered Vegetables

| | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Artichoke | Mustard and other greens |
| Asparagus | Okra |
| Bean Snap or green Lima Dry, edible | Pea Garden, English or edible pod |
| Beet, table | onion |
| Broccoli (including broccoli raab) | Opuntia |
| Brussels sprouts | Parsley |
| Cabbage (including Chinese) | Parsnip |
| Carrot | Pepper |
| Cauliflower | Potato |
| Celeriac | Pumpkin |
| Celery | Radish (all types) |
| Chive | Rhubarb |
| Collards (including kale) | Rutabaga |
| Cucumber | Salsify |
| Eggplant | Spinach |
| Endive | Squash (summer and winter) |
| Garlic | Sweet corn |
| Horseradish | Sweet potato |
| Kohlrabi | Swiss chard |
| Leek | Taro |
| Lettuce | Tomato (including tomatillo) |
| Melon (all types) | Turnip |
| Mushroom (cultivated) | Watermelon |

Appendix C: A List of Plants Commonly Considered
Culinary Herbs and Spices

| | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Ajwain | Clary | Malabathrum |
| Allspice | Cloves | Marjoram |
| Angelica | Comfrey | Mint (all types) |
| Anise | Common rue | Nutmeg |
| Annatto | Coriander | Oregano |
| Artemisia (all types) | Cress | Orris root |
| Asafetida | Cumin | Paprika |
| Basil (all types) | Curry | Parsley |
| Bay (cultivated) | Dill | Pepper |
| Bladder wrack | Fennel | Rocket (arugula) |
| Bolivian coriander | Fenugreek | Rosemary |
| Borage | Filé (gumbo, cultivated) | Rue |
| Calendula | Fingerroot | Saffron |
| Chamomile | French sorrel | Sage (all types) |
| Candle nut | Galangal | Savory (all types) |
| Caper | Ginger | Tarragon |
| Caraway | Hops | Thyme |
| Cardamom | Horehound | Turmeric |
| Cassia | Hyssop | Vanilla |
| Catnip | Lavender | Wasabi |
| Chervil | Lemon balm | Water cress |
| Chicory | Lemon thyme | |
| Cicely | Lovage | |
| Cilantro | Mace | |
| Cinnamon | Mahlab | |

Appendix D: A List of Plants Commonly
Considered Medicinal Herbs

| | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| Artemissia | Liquorice |
| Arum | Marshmallow |
| Astragalus | Mullein |
| Boldo | Passion flower |
| Cananga | Patchouli |
| Comfrey | Pennyroyal |
| Coneflower | Pokeweed |
| Ephedra | St. John's wort |
| Fenugreek | Senna |
| Feverfew | Skullcap |
| Foxglove | Sonchus |
| Ginko biloba | Sorrel |
| Ginseng | Stevia |
| Goat's rue | Tansy |
| Goldenseal | Urtica |
| Gypsywort | Witch hazel |
| Horehound | Wood betony |
| Horsetail | Wormwood |
| Lavender | Yarrow |
| | Yerba buena |