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Defining "Specialty Crops": A Fact Sheet

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Generally, fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, nursery crops and floricultural crops are all considered to be horticultural crops. However, "specialty crops" are more narrowly defined in statute as "fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture)" as part of the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004, as amended (P.L. 108-465, 7 U.S.C. 1621 note).[1] The statutory definition of specialty crops ties to program eligibility and funding allocations for a number of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs providing marketing and research assistance to eligible producer groups.[2] This definition and specialty crop programs in general may become subject to review and debate as the 115th Congress considers reauthorization of the farm bill. Based on available data, USDA estimates that the value of farm-level specialty crop production totals nearly $60 billion, representing about one-fourth of the value of all U.S. crop production.

USDA's list of eligible and ineligible products under the statutory definition is provided in the **text box** on next page. USDA's list is not intended to be all inclusive but rather to provide examples of the most common specialty crops.[3]

USDA's list clarifies that "specialty crops" include fruits and tree nuts,[4] vegetables, culinary herbs and spices, medicinal herbs, and other horticulture products (including honey, maple syrup, coffee, tea leaves, turfgrass, and hops[5]). USDA's listing further includes all nursery and greenhouse crops, including annual bedding plants, potted flowering plants, potted herbaceous perennials, cut flowers, cut cultivated greens, foliage plants, Christmas trees, deciduous flowering trees, broadleaf evergreens, deciduous shade trees, landscape conifers, and deciduous shrubs.[6] USDA's list does not specifically list wine and other related products as eligible, as it covers only "plants commonly considered fruits" including grapes and other crops. However, wine producer groups have been among the recipients of USDA's marketing and research assistance within programs targeting U.S. specialty crops.[7]

USDA guidance further specifies, "Eligible plants must be cultivated or managed and used by people for food, medicinal purposes, and/or aesthetic gratification to be considered specialty crops."[8] Since specialty crop markets consist of both fresh market and processed (secondary) markets, USDA's guidance states, "Processed [specialty crop] products shall consist of greater than 50% of the specialty crop by weight, exclusive of added water."[9] Accordingly, specialty crops could potentially include a wide array of processed fruit and vegetable products and other value-added products, including spices, olive oil, instant coffee, wine, fruit and vegetable juices, jellies and jams, fruit and nut mixes, and other types of product preparations.

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[1] The definition was amended in subsequent farm bills, including the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246) and the Agricultural Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-79).

[2] For more information, see CRS Report R42771, *Fruits, Vegetables, and Other Specialty Crops: Selected Farm Bill and Federal Programs*; and CRS Report R43632, *Specialty Crop Provisions in the 2014 Farm Bill (P.L. 113-79)*.

[3] USDA, "What Is a Specialty Crop?," https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/specialty-crop.

[4] Accordingly, the phrase "tree nuts" explicitly excludes peanuts.

[5] USDA's list specifically excludes industrial hemp, even though hops and hemp belong to the same botanical family of flowering plants (Cannabaceae).

[6] Floriculture refers to flowering and ornamental plants.

[7] See, for example, awarded grants under USDA's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/awards) and the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (https://nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resources/SCRI_projects_abstracts.pdf).

[8] Ibid. See also USDA, "USDA Definition of Specialty Crop," https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/USDASpecialtyCropDefinition.pdf.

[9] Ibid.

USDA Listing of Specialty Crops

Fruits and Tree Nuts

almond, apple, apricot, avocado, banana, blackberry, blueberry, breadfruit, cacao, cashew, cherimoya, cherry, chestnut (for nuts), chokeberry, citrus, coconut, coffee, cranberry, currant, date, feijoa fruit, fig, filbert (hazelnut), gooseberry, grape (incl. raisin), guava, kiwi, litchi, macadamia, mango, nectarine, olive, papaya, passion fruit, peach, pear, pecan, persimmon, pineapple, pistachio, plum (incl. prune), pomegranate, quince, raspberry, strawberry, Suriname cherry, and walnut.

Vegetables

artichoke, asparagus, bean (snap, green, dry, edible), beet (table), broccoli/ broccoli raab, Brussels sprouts, cabbage (incl. Chinese), carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chickpeas, chive, collards (incl. kale), cucumber, edamame, eggplant, endive, pea (garden, dry, edible), garlic, horseradish, kohlrabi, leek, lentils, lettuce, melon, mushroom (cultivated), mustard and other greens, okra, onion, parsley, parsnip, pepper, potato, prickly pear, pumpkin, radish, rhubarb, rutabaga, salsify, spinach, squash (summer and winter), sweet corn, sweet potato, Swiss chard, taro, tomato/tomatillo, turnip, and watermelon.

Culinary Herbs and Spices

allspice, *Angelica* spp., anise, annatto, arugula, asafetida, basil (all types), bay (cultivated), bladder wrack (seaweed), Bolivian coriander, borage, *calendula* (herbal uses), candle nut, caper, caraway, cardamom, cassia spice, cinnamon, clary sage, cloves, catnip, chamomile, chervil, chicory, cicely, cilantro, comfrey, coriander, cress, cumin, curry, dill, fennel, fenugreek, filé (cultivated), fingerroot, galangal, ginger, hops, horehound, hyssop, lavender, lemon balm, lemon thyme, lovage, mace, mahlab, malabathrum, marjoram, mint (all types), mugwort, nutmeg, oregano, orris root, paprika, parsley, pepper, rosemary, rue, saffron, sage (all types), savory (all types), sorrel, tarragon, thyme, turmeric, vanilla, wasabi, and watercress.

Medicinal Herbs

arum, *Artemisia* spp., astralagus, boldo, comfrey, coneflower, fenugreek, feverfew, foxglove, ginkgo biloba, ginseng, goat's rue, goldenseal, gypsywort, horehound, horsetail, lavender, liquorice, marshmallow, mullein, nettle, passionflower, patchouli, pennyroyal, pokeweed, skullcap, sorrel, St. John's wort, senna, sow thistle, stevia, tansy, witch hazel, wood betony, wormwood, yarrow, yerba buena, and Ylang Ylang.

Horticulture: honey, hops, maple syrup, tea leaves, and turfgrass.

Nursery and Greenhouse Plants

- Annual Bedding Plants: species of *Begonia, Dahlia, Geranium, Impatiens*, and *Petunia*; also coleus, marigold, pansy, snapdragon, and vegetable transplants.
- Potted Flowering Plants: African violet, azalea, florist chrysanthemum, flowering bulbs, *Hydrangea* spp., lily, orchid, poinsettia, and rose.
- Potted Herbaceous Perennials: species of *Astilbe, Coreopsis, Delphinium, Dianthus, Heuchera, Hosta, Phlox, Rudbeckia, Salvia*, and *Vinca*; also columbine, daylily, garden chrysanthemum, ivy, ornamental grasses, and peony.
- Cut Flowers: species of *Chrysanthemum, Delphinium, Gladiolus,* and *Iris*; also lily, orchid, rose, snapdragon, and tulip.
- Cut Cultivated Greens: species of *Eucalyptus* and *Pittosporum*; also asparagus fern, holly, coniferous evergreens, and leatherleaf fern.
- Foliage Plants: species of *Anthurium, Dieffenbachia, Dracaena, Ficus, Philodendron* and *Spathipyllum*; also bromeliad, cacti, fern, ivy, and palm.
- Christmas Trees: balsam fir, blue spruce, Douglas fir, Fraser fir, noble fir, Scotch pine, white pine.
- Deciduous Flowering Trees: species of *Magnolia*; also ash, elm, flowering cherry, flowering plum, hawthorn, redbud, and serviceberry.
- Broadleaf Evergreens: species *Cotoneaster, Euonymus, Pieris, Rhododendron*, and *Viburnum*; azalea, boxwood, and holly.
- Deciduous Shade Trees: ash, elm, honey locust, linden, maple, oak, poplar, sycamore, sweetgum.
- Landscape Conifers: arborvitae, cypress, fir, hemlock, juniper, pine, spruce, and yew.
- Deciduous Shrubs: species of *Buddleia, Hibiscus, Hydrangea, Spirea, Viburnum, and Weigela; also* barberry and rose.

List of Ineligible Commodities

alfalfa, barley (incl. malting barley), buckwheat, canola, canola oil, clover, cotton, corn (amylomaize, dent, field, flint, flower, Japonica Striped Maize, pod, waxy, white), cottonseed oil, dairy products, eggs, fish (marine, freshwater), flax (incl. false flax), flaxseed, hay, hemp, livestock products, millet, mustard seed oil, oats, peanut oil, peanuts, primrose, quinoa, range grasses, rapeseed oil, rice (incl. wild rice), rye, safflower (meal, oil), shellfish (marine, freshwater), sorghum, soybean oil, soybeans, sugar beets, sugarcane, sunflower oil, tobacco, tofu, and triticale.

Source: CRS adapted from USDA, https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/specialty-crop.

USDA's listing specifically excludes as "ineligible" many other agricultural commodities, including federally supported commodity crops (e.g., grains, corn, soybeans, cotton, rice, and barley);[10] oilseed crops (soybeans, peanuts, and other oilseeds); sugar and sugar beets; hay crops including alfalfa; livestock, dairy, and poultry products; fish and shellfish (marine or freshwater); and tobacco. Many of these ineligible products are supported through existing USDA programs.

Previously, some in Congress have proposed modifying and/or expanding the existing definition to include other commodities on the list of eligible products.[11] In part, these proponents claim that some products now ineligible to be considered as specialty crops (such as farmed shellfish) had at one time been considered to be specialty crops. Previously, USDA and some agricultural researchers had broadly grouped a range of agricultural products as "minor" and/or "specialty" in order to differentiate these crops from other federally supported commodity crops.

Based on the statutory definition of "specialty crops," USDA's most recent USDA *Census of Agriculture* indicates that specialty crops comprise a major part of U.S. agriculture. In 2012, USDA estimated that the value of farm-level specialty crop production totaled nearly $60 billion, representing about one-fourth of the value of U.S. crop production (**Table 1**).

Table 1. U.S. Crop Production Statistics, Commodity and Horticultural Crops

	Farms (1,000)	Sales ($ billion)
Total U.S. Agricultural Crops (incl. nursery and greenhouse)	**1,032**	**212.4**
Specialty Crops		
Vegetables, melons, potatoes	72	16.9
Fruits, tree nuts, and berries	106	25.9
Nursery, greenhouse, floriculture	53	14.5
Cut trees, and short rotation woody crops	13	0.3
Total Specialty Crops	**244**	**57.6**
Specialty Crops, Share Total Agriculture	**24%**	**27%**

Source: CRS from USDA, *2012 Census of Agriculture* (Table 2, Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold).

However, other data and statistics are not always available to precisely highlight other aspects of the scale and scope of the U.S. specialty crop sectors. In particular, aggregate trade data and statistics for all specialty crops, as defined in statute, may be difficult to quantify. In the United States, more than 350 types of fruit, vegetable, tree nut, flower, nursery, and other horticultural crops are grown or cultivated. Some of these crops may not be individually classified within the official Harmonized Tariff Schedule (HTS) maintained by the U.S. International Trade Commission (USITC) due to relatively small quantities of traded product, resulting in some products being classified within a broader miscellaneous category of products along with other non-specialty crops.[12] In addition, specialty crops span several HTS chapters, including chapters

[10] For more information, see CRS Report R43448, *Farm Commodity Provisions in the 2014 Farm Bill (P.L. 113-79)*.

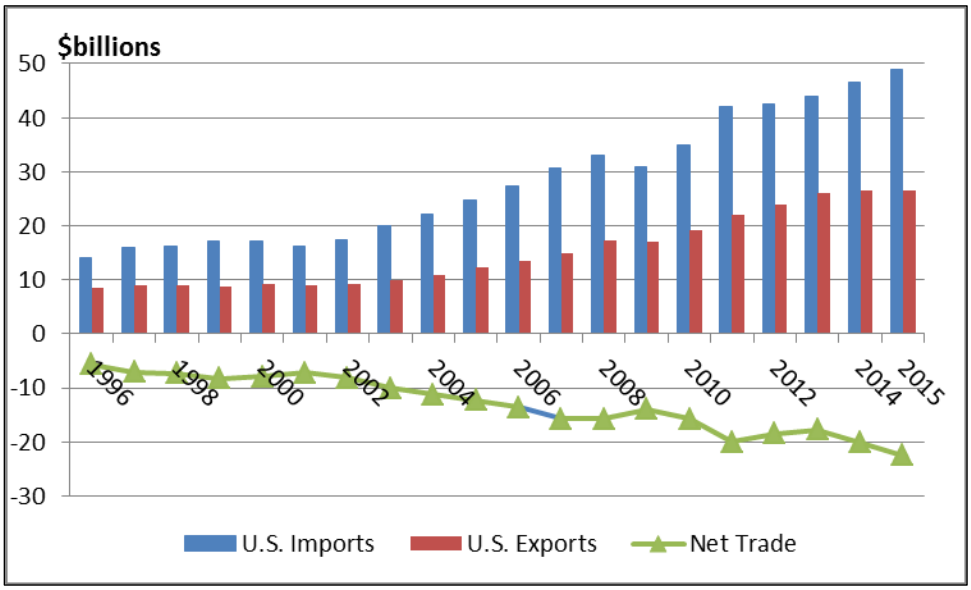
[11] See, for example, bills and amendments from the 113th Congress that would add farmed shellfish to the specialty crops definition (Shellfish Marketing Assistance Fairness Act (H.R. 1590/S. 754) and H.Amdt. 215 to H.R. 1947. See also the Shellfish Marketing Assistance Fairness Act (H.R. 1176) in the 112th Congress.

[12] For example, some specialty crop products are classified as "NESOI," or "not elsewhere specified or included."

6, 7, 8, 9, and 20 and parts of chapters 4, 12, 15, 17, 21, and 22.[13] This can complicate determination of precise trade (export and import) statistics for all specialty crops.

Based on available data, there has been a growing U.S. trade deficit in selected specialty crops (**Figure 1**). Although U.S. specialty crop exports totaled $26.4 billion in 2015, U.S. imports of specialty crops were $48.9 billion, resulting in a gap between imports and exports of $22.5 billion. Major U.S. imports—accounting for nearly 80% of the value of all specialty crop imports—include fresh fruits, tree nuts and vegetables; wine, and coffee and tea. Major U.S. exports include fresh and processed fruits, tree nuts, and vegetables.[14] This trade deficit in U.S. specialty crop trade has widened over time as growth in imports has outpaced export growth.

Figure 1. Estimated U.S. Specialty Crop Trade, 1996-2015



Source: Compiled by CRS from calendar year data in the U.S. International Trade Commission's Trade DataWeb database, https://dataweb.usitc.gov/.

Notes: Specialty crops as defined and according to USDA's website list (https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/specialty-crop) and includes live trees and other plants; bulbs, roots, and the like; cut flowers and ornamental foliage (HTS chapter 6); edible vegetables and certain roots and tubers (HTS chapter 7); edible fruit and nuts; peel of citrus fruit or melons (HTS chapter 8); coffee, tea, maté, and spices (HTS chapter 9); preparations of vegetables, fruit, nuts, or other parts of plants (HTS chapter 20); honey (part of HTS chapter 4); fruit, vegetable, herbaceous plant, and grass seed (part of HTS chapter 12); olive oil (part of HTS chapter 15); maple syrup (part HTS chapter 21); and wine, fermented fruit beverages, and vermouth (part of HTS chapter 22, but not including brandies and vinegars). USITC's *2016 Harmonized Tariff Schedule* is available at https://www.usitc.gov/tata/hts/index.htm.

[13] USITC's *2016 Harmonized Tariff Schedule* is available at https://www.usitc.gov/tata/hts/index.htm. For more information, see breakout in the footnotes to **Figure 1**. Other products not included in this compilation might also be considered specialty crops, such as fruit brandies and vinegar.

[14] For more information on U.S. fruit and vegetable trade (excluding nuts and other specialty crops), see CRS Report R42771, *Fruits, Vegetables, and Other Specialty Crops: Selected Farm Bill and Federal Programs*.

Author Information

Renée Johnson
Specialist in Agricultural Policy

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