

The Guatemalan produce industry last month celebrated its 30th year participating in the Produce Marketing Association's (PMA) Fresh Summit convention, with a renewed focus on emerging products and a new industry brand "Beyond Expectations".



We asked Agexport Guatemala manager Paola Alvarez whether the new brand could also be beyond bananas, for which Guatemala is the world's fifth-largest exporter and the leading supplier to the U.S.

"Yes, it's a lot more than bananas," Alvarez joked.

"We brought 90 Guatemalan businesspeople from the agricultural sector that come to promote themselves and their products in the United States - in fruits and vegetables we have a long list of products that we are managing and we are here exhibiting."

Of the key products she mentioned processed plantains, including dried and in purée form, green vegetables and ornamental plants.

"Guatemala is also known for its exotic fruits like mangosteen and for example rambutan, and we also have super foods like chia, a product that is linked to our Mayan heritage.

"There's also cacao, of course honey, and various agricultural products that we'll be promoting from 2018 to 2020."

Another crop that is being introduced to the country is blueberries, with which Agexport director Eduardo Castro has been involved.

"For the cultivation of blueberries we have a significant niche. We've done trips to Mexico, to Colombia, Chile and Peru to see the systems for planting," said Castro, who also heads up Coprisa Agroexport.

"Now we're going to start in Guatemala a process of importing plants, planting, and starting to produce. I think that in 2018 it'll be a product that Guatemala will be able to offer."

He said this was made possible as plants were imported in pots, to be grown under macro-tunnels with micro-irrigation.

"The thing is that now with the technology you bring a plant that comes in a pot that's already grown for six months. So what you gain with the plant is growth of six months. You just have to maintain and care for it.

"There are 7,000 plants more or less per hectare with production of 1.5kg in the first year, then rising to 2.5 kilos and then 5kg per year.

"It's a plant that you prune, and using the macro-tunnel to protect from hail and rains that are very strong."

He said with this method Guatemalan growers could conceivably produce year-round, but would aim to have production outside the windows of U.S., Canadian and Chilean supply with December as a key harvesting month.

The plan will be to start supplying Guatemalan and regional markets, before setting up export programs in the longer term in the United States, Canada and the U.K.

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Eduardo Castro