USDA Definition of Specialty Crop

Skip to Page 4 where the list starts!

OR...click "Ctrl" + F to bring up a search box and do a search for YOUR crop to see if it's on the list. Please note to make sure it's not on the non-specialty crop list on page 11. Those crops don't qualify.

BACKGROUND

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 National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), the Office of the Chief Economist (OCE), U.S. Forest Service (FS), the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Risk Management Agency (RMA).

WHAT ARE SPECIALTY CROPS?

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. Fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, nursery crops and floricultural crops are all considered to be horticultural crops. Regardless, the specific mention of these crop groups means that plants so classified automatically qualify as specialty crops. Where interpretation is needed is in which plants, not specifically mentioned in legislation, can be classified as horticulture (sic) crops.

WHAT IS HORTICULTURE?

Horticulture is defined as that branch of agriculture concerned with growing plants that are used by people for food, for medicinal purposes, and for aesthetic gratification. Horticulture is 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 – 149 U.S. 304.

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 2012.

WHAT ARE CROPS?

There are many definitions of the word "crop". When referring to plants, USDA considers crops to be those plants that are cultivated either for sale or for subsistence. 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, pecans, blueberry, huckleberry and cranberry are considered specialty crops by USDA. In order for a plant to be considered cultivated, some form of management must be applied. The intensity of the management is not critical to determining whether a plant is cultivated or not. This definition includes plants or plant products harvested from "wild areas" whose populations are managed, monitored and documented to ensure long-term, sustainable production. If a naturally occurring population of plants is brought under management and that plant satisfies the definition of specialty crop presented in the second paragraph of this document, then those plants would be considered specialty crops. It is common for such plants to be designated "wild-harvested" for marketing purposes. Such a designation does not preclude a plant from being considered a specialty crop as long as the above criteria are met. 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.

Similarly, some cultivated plants have multiple uses. Amaranth may be grown as a leafy green, or it may be grown as a grain. Leafy greens are vegetables, therefore amaranth grown in such a manner would be considered a specialty crop. However, grains are not specialty crops, therefore amaranth grown for grain would not be considered a specialty crop. There are many other examples of crops with multiple uses and an exhaustive list would not be possible here. However, the following groups of crops are <u>not</u> considered specialty crops: grains (corn, wheat, rice, etc.), oil seed crops (canola, soy bean, camelina, etc), bio-energy crops (switchgrass, sugar cane, etc), forages (hay, alfalfa, clover, etc.), field crops (peanut, sugar beet, cotton, etc.), and plants federally controlled as illegal drug plants (cannabis, coca).

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.

APPENDIX A – PLANTS COMMONLY CONSIDERED FRUITS AND TREE NUTS

Almond	Grape (including Raisin)
Apple	Guava
Apricot	Kiwi
Aronia berry	Litchi
Avocado	Macadamia
Banana	Mango
Blackberry	Nectarine
Blueberry	Olive
Breadfruit	Papaya
Cacao	Passion Fruit
Cashew	Peach
Citrus	Pear
Cherimoya	Pecan
Cherry	Persimmon
Chestnut (for Nuts)	Pineapple
Coconut	Pistachio
Coffee	Plum (including Prune)
Cranberry	Pomegranate
Currant	Quince
Date	Raspberry
Feijou	Strawberry
Fig	Suriname Cherry
Filbert (Hazelnut)	Walnut
Gooseberry	

APPENDIX B – PLANTS COMMONLY CONSIDERED VEGETABLES

Artichoke	Mushroom (Cultivated)
Asparagus	Mustard and Other Greens
Bean Snap or Green Lima Dry, Edible	Okra
Beet, Table	Pea Garden English or Edible Pod Dry, Edible
Broccoli (including Broccoli Raab)	Onion
Brussels Sprouts	Opuntia
Cabbage (including Chinese)	Parsley
Carrot	Parsnip
Cauliflower	Pepper
Celeriac	Potato
Celery	Pumpkin
Chickpeas (Large and Small)	Radish (All Types)
Chive	Rhubarb
Collards (including Kale)	Rutabaga
Cucumber	Salsify
Edamame	Spinach
Eggplant	Squash (Summer and Winter)
Endive	Sweet Corn
Garlic	Sweet Potato
Horseradish	Swiss Chard
Kohlrabi	Taro
Leek	Tomato (including Tomatillo)
Lentils	Turnip
Lettuce	Watermelon
Melon (All Types)	

APPENDIX C: 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: PLANTS COMMONLY CONSIDERED MEDICINAL HERBS

Artemissia	Mullein
Arum	Passion Flower
Astragalus	Patchouli
Boldo	Pennyroyal
Cananga	Pokeweed
Comfrey	St. John's Wort
Coneflower	Senna
Fenugreek	Skullcap
Feverfew	Sonchus
Foxglove	Sorrel
Ginko Biloba	Stevia
Ginseng	Tansy
Goat's Rue	Urtica
Goldenseal	Witch Hazel
Gypsywort	Wood Betony
Horehound	Wormwood
Horsetail	Yarrow
Lavender	Yerba Buena
Liquorice	
Marshmallow	

APPENDIX E: PLANTS COMMONLY CONSIDERED FLORICULTURE AND NURSERY CROPS

This list includes the major segments of floriculture and nursery crops. For each segment, a non-exclusive list of the most common plants is provided. Providing a complete list for each segment would not be practical given the thousands of different ornamental plant taxa that are commercially produced.

Annual Bedding Plants

Begonia	Coleus	Dahlia
Geranium	Impatiens	Marigold
Pansy	Petunia	Snapdragon
Vegetable Transplants		

Broadleaf Evergreens

Azalea	Boxwood	Cotoneaster
Euonymus	Holly	Pieris
Rhododendron	Viburnum	

Christmas Trees

Balsam Fir	Blue Spruce	Douglas Fir
Fraser Fir	Living Christmas Tree	Noble Fir
Scots Pine	White Pine	

Cut Cultivated Greens

Asparagus Fern	Coniferous Evergreens	Eucalyptus
Holly	Leatherleaf Fern	Pittosporum

Cut Flowers

Carnation	Chrysanthemum	Delphinium
Gladiolus	Iris	Lily
Orchid	Rose	Snapdragon
Tulip		

Deciduous Flowering Trees

Crabapple	Dogwood	Crepe Myrtle
Flowering Pear	Flowering Cherry	Flowering Plum

Hawthorn	Magnolia	Redbud
Service Berry		

Deciduous Shade Trees

Ash	Elm	Honey Locust
Linden	Maple	Oak
Poplar	Sweetgum	Sycamore

Deciduous Shrubs

Barberry	Buddleia	Hibiscus
Hydrangea	Rose	Spirea
Viburnum	Weigela	

Foliage Plants

Anthurium	Bromeliad	Cacti
Dieffenbachia	Dracaena	Fern
Ficus	Ivy	Palm
Philodendron	Spathipyllum	

Fruit And Nut Plants

Berry Plants	Citrus Trees	Deciduous Fruit and Nut Trees
Grapevines		

Landscape Conifers

Arborvitae	Chamaecyparis	Fir
Hemlock	Juniper	Pine
Spruce	Yew	

Potted Flowering Plants

African Violet	Azalea	Florist Chrysanthemum
Flowering Bulbs	Hydrangea	Lily
Orchid	Poinsettia	Rose

Potted Herbaceous Perennials

Astilbe	Columbine	Coreopsis
Daylily	Delphinium	Dianthus
Garden Chrysanthemum	Heuchera	Hosta
Ivy	Ornamental Grasses	Peony
Phlox	Rudbeckia	Salvia
Vinca		

Propagative Materials

Bare-Root Divisions	Cuttings	Liners
Plug Seedlings	Tissue-Cultured Plantlets	Prefinished Plants

APPENDIX F: EXAMPLES OF INELIGIBLE CROPS

The following lists are not intended to be all-inclusive but to provide guidance based on previous inquiries.

Oil Seed Crops (including oil and non-oil cultivars)

Camelina	Canola	Cottonseed
Crambe	Flaxseed	Linseed
Mustard seed	Peanut	Rapeseed
Safflower	Sesame	Soybean
Sunflower seed		

Field and Grain Crops

Amaranth for grain	Buckwheat	Barley (including malting barley)
Corn	Cotton	Grain sorghum
Oats	Peanut	Proso millet
Rye	Quinoa	Rice (including wild)
Sugar beet	Sugarcane	Tobacco
Wheat		

Forage Crops

Alfalfa	Clover	Hay
Range grasses		

Fiber Crops

Cotton	Flax	Hemp