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## Increasing Buyers of Thanh Long Fruit

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At a recent conference in Ho Chi Minh City, the Dragon Fruit Gap Project (EUREGAP) and the Southern Fruit Research Institute (SOFRI) discussed the potential and competitiveness of Vietnamese thanh long (dragon) fruit in the EU market. One of the conference's purposes was to find ways to enlarge this fruit's niche in this market over the next few years. (Note : EUREGAP stands for European Retail Produce Good Agricultural Practices)



Steven Humphreys (left) and a EUREGAP expert at the conference

An international expert on introducing tropical fruits in the EU, Steven Humphreys, said that the Netherlands, France, Germany, and the UK rank first among EU countries in importing thanh long. These countries bought some 590 tonnes of this fruit each year, of which the Netherlands imported 200 tonnes, France 185 tonnes, Germany 100 tonnes, and the UK 105 tonnes, he said. The Netherlands, France, and Germany resold a large part of the fruit they imported to other countries, he added. Major importers of Vietnamese thanh long include Bud Holland and TFC from the Netherlands, Exofarm, Dang, and Drevin, and the Tang Freres supermarket system from France, Weichert from Germany, and Utopia and MWW from the UK.

Apart from companies, the EU imports thanh long through major supermarkets, supermarkets specializing in selling Asian goods, and wholesale markets. Four main groups of the fruit, with 15 varieties, are found in the EU market. They include red-peel, white-flesh fruits mainly imported from Thailand and Vietnam, red-peel, red-flesh fruits imported from Israel and Malaysia, red-peel, violet-flesh fruits from Guatemala, Nicaragua and Ecuador, and yellow-peel, white-flesh fruits bought from Colombia, Ecuador, and Israel. European consumers not only eat thanh long but also use the exotic fruit for decoration, as the fruit has nice colors.

### Vietnamese thanh long in the EU

Vietnam exports some 700 tonnes of red-peel, white-flesh thanh long to the EU each year, which is a 40-percent niche in this market. Thai thanh long makes an 18-percent niche, while Israel thanh long has a 42-percent market share of the EU market. However, Vietnam's market share has tended to decrease in the face of more competitive prices of Thai and Israeli products.

Steven Humphreys noted that Vietnam has high transport costs since the fruit is carried by airplane, which accounts for some 85 percent of the product's total cost. Four times a week, Vietnam sends thanh long to the EU with B777 aircrafts, at a transport cost of US\$3/kilo while Thailand pays only US\$2-2.5/kg and Israel only US\$1/kg. To reduce its cost, Vietnam sends part of its exports to Thailand for packaging and export to the EU.

A weakness of Vietnamese thanh long is that the fruit is somewhat bland, which is a turnoff for EU consumers who prefer sweet or sour fruits. This is the reason Vietnamese red-peel, white-flesh fruit is gradually losing ground

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to yellow-peel, white-flesh fruit. Meanwhile, Vietnamese thanh long has not fully satisfied production standards of EUREGAP.

### Growers and exporters need to change strategies

Growers must diversify their range of products, as EU importers want to buy different varieties of the fruit from the same source. Growers must also follow safety standards of the EUREGAP, improve product packaging and the post-harvest technology. For their part, fruits research institutes in Vietnam should develop new varieties of thanh long for EU taste like Israel.

At the same time, Vietnamese exporters should sell the fruit at CIF (cost - insurance - freight) price instead of FOB (free on board) price, while reducing transport cost and advertising Vietnamese varieties at fruit fairs. Both growers and exporters must work together to build a good image of Vietnamese thanh long in the eyes of foreign customers.

By Phung Long

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