Okra (ladies' fingers)

Market requirements

Varieties: Ridged cultivars, such as Clemson Spineless, Bindi and Annie Oakley are preferred

Size: 4-10 cm
Clemson: 4-7 cm

Shape: "ladies' finger", smooth skinned, some ridging

Colour: Green, but not too light in colour

Ripeness: Very immature and readily snapped

Taste & Texture: Contents sticky, but unfibrous

Getting to market

Harvesting, Handling and Storage

Okra should be harvested at least every other day, but should not be picked in wet conditions. Secateurs can be used for harvesting, and a stem of 1 cm should be left on the pod. Harvested pods should be stored in the shade in crates, although bags can be used by pickers and pods transferred as soon as possible to the crates, since okra generates a great deal of field heat. Rubber gloves are best for handling, which should be kept to a minimum.

Okra needs rapid post-harvest cooling to reduce the field heat and should be cooled in a temperature of 8-10ºC, but for not more than 36

(continued)

hours prior to shipment. Okra can be shipped in aircraft pallets, but if they are shipped already packaged, it is important that the boxes are removed from the cool store 2-3 hours before shipment in order to allow any condensation to evaporate. Okra have high rates of respiration and deterioration, developing yellow or black ridges, mould or pod collapse if exposed to excess moisture. Relative humidity should be kept at 90-95% to prevent wilting.

Packaging

Okra can be loose packed in 2.5 to 5 kg boxes, which must be ventilated and preferably be full lidded. Lower capacity packs are preferred. There are no international quality standards issued for okra, which nonetheless must be of high quality and homogenous in each carton for acceptability on the market. It is also advisable to provide the following information on the carton:

- country of origin
- produce
- weight
- date of packing
- packer

together with the following handling information:

- fragile symbol
- side-up symbol
- indication of temperature range.

Branding and Promotion

There has been no generic promotion nor major in-store promotion of okra. Such promotion could help the market prospects of okra. Attractive packaging and clear labelling are also good forms of quality promotion.

Import Regulations

Okra come under tariff heading 0709 90 90 for "other vegetables" not categorised elsewhere and tariffs on entering the EEC are as follows:

Full tariff:	16%
GSP countries:	Free
ACP countries:	Free
Cyprus:	5.8%
Malta, Turkey:	Free

Okra (ladies' fingers)

In order to receive preferential tariff treatment, produce must be accompanied by the appropriate forms: EUR 1 for ACP countries or Form A for GSP countries or least developed developing countries (LDDC). Certain hygiene standards must be met and all fresh produce entering the EEC must be accompanied by the original of a phytosanitory certificate (see Appendix 1).

When to sell

Timing

There are a number of small suppliers of okra, covering the different seasons:

Brazil:	October-May
Cyprus:	May-November
Egypt:	June-August
India:	July-October
Kenya:	all year
Mexico:	October-March
Nigeria:	February-November
Zambia:	January-March
Zimbabwe:	November-April

Seasonal gaps on the market have not been a problem, but sales are currently mainly through outlets serving ethnic communities. If quantities sold increase, December-January is the weakestsupply period. Wholesale prices quoted are predominantly for Kenyan produce and show little seasonal variation, averaging 200 pence per kg over 1989/90.

Market Trends

The market for okra has shown slow growth over the last decade and is now estimated to stand at about 3,000 tons per annum. Consumption is forecast to continue growing as it gains wider acceptance with the public. It is reasonably versatile, being acceptable as a salad vegetable, for stir-frying, for thickening stews and soups and as a vegetable accompaniment to a variety of dishes. This versatility, together with its relative ease of preparation, makes it a vegetable to watch for possible future expansion on the market.