The US imports 60 percent of the fresh fruit and 40 percent of the fresh vegetables available to US residents. Mexico is the leading supplier of fresh fruit and vegetable imports.

**Mexico**

Mexico provided 64 percent of US vegetable imports and 46 percent of US fruit and nut imports in 2021.

Mexico is the leading supplier of imported tomatoes, avocados, raspberries, bell peppers, and strawberries, many of which are produced under protected culture structures in greenhouses and plastic-covered tunnels rather than in open fields. Almost all Mexican horticultural exports, including 90 percent of Mexican fruit exports and 95 percent of vegetable exports, go to the US.

There are several reasons for the upsurge in Mexican exports of horticultural commodities to the US, including free trade agreements such as NAFTA-USMCA and an improving infrastructure that can truck Mexican produce to the US quickly using the same highways that are used to transport goods made in Mexico, including autos and auto parts. Mexico’s farm labor costs are 10 to 20 percent of US farm labor costs, and Mexican farms that export fresh produce to the US have latecomer advantages, including producing fruits and vegetables under protective structures.

Some fruits and vegetables produced in Mexico are destined primarily for the US. For example, up to half of the tomatoes, lettuce, watermelons, avocados, and strawberries that are grown in Mexico, and up to 75 percent of the asparagus, broccoli, and cucumbers grown in Mexico, are exported to the US. Some of these commodities arrive in the US every month of the year, such as tomatoes, while others are more seasonal, such as strawberries whose arrival peaks between December and April.

Mexican exports of most fresh fruits and vegetables have steadily risen, but exports of fresh cantaloupes have fallen, likely in response to repeated Salmonella illnesses.
traced to Mexican cantaloupes in the 1990s and early 2000s. With fewer imports from Mexico, US cantaloupe imports from Guatemala and Honduras have been rising.

Berries

Strawberries are the third most valuable fruit produced in the US, after grapes and apples, and account for 13 percent of the farm value of US produced fruit, while blueberries account for five percent. Most fresh strawberries consumed in the US are produced in the US, 80 percent, while most fresh blueberries are imported, 60 percent. The import share of fresh strawberries more than doubled in the 21st century, and the imports share of fresh blueberries rose by 50 percent.

Beer

Alcoholic beverages are included with horticultural imports, and they are worth $26 billion a year, about the same as fresh fruit and vegetable imports. Mexico is the world’s leading exporter of beer, and Modelo surpassed Bud Light as the most popular US beer in 2023.

Food Safety

The Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011 aimed to make both US-grown and imported fresh produce safer for US residents by preventing rather than simply responding to outbreaks of foodborne illnesses. The FSMA requires fresh produce firms in the US and abroad (if they export to the US) to identify and remedy vulnerabilities that could lead to food-borne illnesses.

A USDA study of how 26 Mexican produce exporters complied with the FMSA included eight farms that began to export after 2011. Most Mexican export farms grow several fruits and vegetables, specialize in producing for the US markets, and often have contracts with US buyers that set quantity and quality standards. Nine of the 26 firms exported mostly tomatoes, five mostly strawberries and another five cantaloupes, and four green onions.

Half of the 26 Mexican exporters had their produce certified as safe by three or more auditing firms including PrimusGFS, and farms that export organic commodities were certified organic as well. Several Mexican exporters were also certified as compliant with labor laws and social responsibility, which is a requirement of some US buyers. The changes made by Mexican exporters to improve food safety include enclosing packing sheds,
installing walls in coolers that are easier to clean, and monitoring irrigation water for contaminants and ensuring that workers wash their hands frequently. Some exporters drill deep wells to obtain cleaner water. Most said they had to explain to their staff and workers the importance of adhering to food safety protocols, although others reportedly put an owner’s younger son or daughter in charge of food safety, perhaps making it seem less important.

Training employees in good food safety practices is hard due to high worker turnover, the high share of workers who do not speak Spanish well, and too few safety managers for workforces that may reach 5,000 at peak season. Most of the farms were large: ten of the 26 exporting farms had 300 to 500 seasonal workers and seven had more than 500 seasonal workers.

US fresh produce suppliers are also required to comply with the FMSA, but some Mexican exporters believe that they are held to higher standards. US importers of fresh produce must verify that imported produce complies with FMSA protocols, while most US farmers are subject to relatively few inspections conducted by state agriculture departments or the FDA.

A relatively small share of the produce exported from Mexico is organic. US data are not available for all commodities, but when organic shares of Mexican imports are available, five percent or less of most major commodities are organic.

**LAC**

Mexico accounts for almost 60 percent of US agricultural imports from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). US agricultural imports have been rising in value to $160 billion,
and imports from Latin America account for $60 billion or almost 40 percent of US farm imports.

USDA categorizes farm commodities such as rice and coffee as bulk, sugar and livestock as intermediate, and meat, fruit, vegetables, and alcoholic beverages as consumer-oriented products. About 70 percent of US farm imports by value are consumer-oriented products.

The five commodities whose share of US farm imports from LAC increased the most over the past decade were fresh berries, tequila, fresh avocados, beef and beef products, and beer. Fresh berries account for over six percent of US farm imports from LAC, with three-fourths from Mexico and followed by Peru and Chile.

Fresh avocados are five percent of farm imports from Latin America, and 90 percent are from Mexico. To meet rising US demand, Mexico expanded its avocado orchards from 115,000 to 222,000 hectares. Michoacán and, since 2022 Jalisco, export fresh avocados to the US.

Beef, beer, and tequila each account for five percent of US farm imports from Latin America. Mexico accounts for almost three-fourths of US beer imports, and 99 percent of beer imports from Latin America. US beer consumption is declining to four liters per person, but the share of imported and craft beer is rising, with Mexican-brewed Modelo accounting for eight percent of US beer sales compared with seven percent for Bud Light, six percent for Coors Light, and five percent for Miller Lite. Constellation Brands, which owns Robert Mondavi and other wine brands, also owns Corona and Modelo and has three breweries in Mexico.

USDA conducted interviews in some of the Mexican states that export produce to the US.

Most Mexican Produce Imports are Conventional, Not Organic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop</th>
<th>Total imports from Mexico</th>
<th>Imports from Mexico identified as organic in U.S. trade statistics</th>
<th>Organics’ share of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avocados, Hass and Hass-like</td>
<td>1,085,000</td>
<td>58,000</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bananas</td>
<td>412,900</td>
<td>138,400</td>
<td>33.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blueberries</td>
<td>63,500</td>
<td>10,400</td>
<td>16.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blackberries</td>
<td>120,200</td>
<td>5,600</td>
<td>4.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bell peppers</td>
<td>566,700</td>
<td>39,300</td>
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<tr>
<td>Garlic</td>
<td>19,200</td>
<td>0,400</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lemons</td>
<td>48,600</td>
<td>9,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mangos</td>
<td>337,700</td>
<td>46,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raspberries</td>
<td>108,100</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>2.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Squash</td>
<td>475,900</td>
<td>23,100</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strawberries</td>
<td>236,300</td>
<td>71,000</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Latin America Accounts for Almost 40% of U.S. Farm Imports

U.S. agricultural imports globally, and from Latin America and the Caribbean, 2001-21: Nominal value, real value, and approximate mass
Mexico Provides ¾ of Fresh Berry Imports from Latin America

Imports of All Types of Berries from Latin America have Risen, But Imports of Blueberries have Risen Fastest

U.S. Beer Imports From Mexico, 2001–2021

References


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