

CBI Product Factsheet:

Fresh Okra in Europe

Introduction

Okra is an exotic vegetable in Europe and is consumed mostly by people of African, Caribbean and Asian origin. The main market is the United Kingdom, due to its large Asian and African population. Okra is expected to become more mainstream, providing opportunities for exporters from developing countries.

Product Definition

Okra is the fruit of the plant *Abelmoschus esculentus* also known as lady's finger or gombo. Okra can be produced in both tropical or sub-tropical climates. The plant can grow up to 2 meters and is either annual or perennial.

The unripe fruit should be picked a couple of days after flowering and can be eaten as a vegetable. The seed pods are green or red and can grow up to 18 cm long. Fresh okra can be kept fresh only a couple of days. Okra seeds can be used for making edible oil.

In the European market, okra is considered to be an ethnic vegetable and is consumed mostly by African, Caribbean and Asian communities. Okra is shipped to the EU by air.

Table 1: Combined Nomenclature (CN) commodity code for okra

Number	Product
07099990 (from 2012)	Fresh or chilled vegetables, n.e.s
07099090 (until 2012)	Fresh or chilled vegetables, n.e.s

Source: Eurostat Comext.

Product Specification

Quality:

Import of fresh fruits and vegetables from third countries to the EU must conform to general standards. These standards can be found in the [General Marketing Standards of Regulation \(EU\) No. 543/2011](#). Annex 1 of this regulation summarizes the minimum requirements that products should be intact, clean and sound, (practically) free from pests, damage, abnormal external moisture, internal browning, and in a condition to withstand transport and handling.

Due to the rapid rate of growth and development, okra should be harvested every one to two days to ensure the size specification range.

Okra should not be harvested in the rain or when excessively wet, and should be handled with care. Rubber gloves should be used during harvesting and handling. On harvesting approximately 1 cm of stem should remain attached to the pod. Due to the perishable nature of okra, harvesting must take place on the day of, or on the day preceding shipment.

There are 3 different quality classes of okra:

- Extra Class (superior quality);
- Class I (slight defects in shape, development and colouring);
- Class II (defects in shape, development, colouring and skin).

Oversize and damage crops are to be removed in order to meet the highest quality classes.

Size:

Okra products should be harvest between 40 to 115 mm in length, green, and tender and readily snap at the tip. Size is determined by the length of the okra (in mm. without peduncle) in accordance with the following table:

Table 2 Size codes for okra

Size code	Length of the fruit in mm
A	40.1 – 65.0
B	65.1 – 90.0
C	90.1 – 115.0

D	115.1 and above
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Packaging:

Okra is highly perishable but with optimum post-harvest handling systems (cold chain), quality is maintained for four to seven days.

- The visible part of the contents of the package must be representative of the entire shipment.
- Okra is to be packed in a way that properly protects the product. The materials used inside the package must be clean and of a quality such as to avoid causing any external or internal damage to the produce. The use of materials, particularly paper or stamps bearing trade specifications, is allowed, provided the printing or labelling has been done with non-toxic ink or glue.
- Stickers individually affixed to the produce shall be such that, when removed, they neither leave visible traces of glue, nor lead to skin defects.
- Sacks or bags are not to be used as these incur damage and cause heat build-up. Packages must be free of all foreign matter.
- All pods meeting the size specifications can be loose packed into cartons (size grading into individual size is not required). Okra is graded by hand or moving conveyors or standard grading tables. Net weights are dependent on the importers' requirements and vary from 3.5 to 5 kg, sometimes up 6-7kg (8 to 10lb, or 15lb).
- The usual packing is 4-5 kg cartons with ventilation holes to prevent overheating, because okra exhibits exceedingly high rates of respirations, which generates a large production of heat and results in rapid deterioration.

Labelling:

- To protect the right for consumers in the EU to access useful and appropriate information, [Regulation \(EU\) No. 1169/2011](#) establishes the general principles, requirements and responsibilities governing food information, and in particular food labelling.
- Each package must bear the following particulars, in letters grouped on the same side, legibly and indelibly marked, and visible from the outside:
 - Information about the packer/dispatcher and or shipper
 - The nature of the product
 - Country of origin of the product
 - Traceability code
 - Class and size of the product.
- Additional information about labelling, packaging and quality can be found in the [CBI Market Intelligence Platform for Fresh Fruit and Vegetables](#).

What is the demand for fresh okra in Europe?

General information about trade developments in the European market for fresh fruit and vegetables is provided on the [CBI Market Intelligence Platform](#).

This section provides you with more information on trade and statistics of production, and insights in the consumption of fresh okra.

Trade statistics

There are no detailed trade statistics available on okra. However, this section provides you with more information on the trade in okra based on industry reports.

Okra is mainly imported by the UK, France, the Netherlands, and Italy. France and the United Kingdom are the largest markets, due to their respective large African and Asian populations. The Netherlands acts mainly as a re-exporter to other European countries. French imports are estimated at around 7 thousand tonnes per year, whereas the UK imports about 15 to 20 thousand tonnes. According to industry sources, Italy is importing about 3 to 5 thousand tonnes of okra annually.

The peak in the EU supply is in March, and decreases during summertime. In March both African and Central American suppliers are active on the EU market. India supplies whole year round, but has its peak supply from October to May. After March supply from India and Central America drops and Africa takes over. The most important suppliers to the UK market are Jordan and India. Other suppliers are from Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, Central America and Thailand. However, the Netherlands is also a supplier to the UK market, but this compromises re-exported okra.

Both [Central American](#) and [Caribbean](#) exporters are expected to increase exports to Europe.

In 2015, [India suspended the export of okra](#) to Europe due to pest control and to avoid the risk of an EU import ban. These control measures provide opportunities for other suppliers in, for example, Kenya and Thailand.

Production statistics

For production data of the Statistics division of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (Faostat) is used. The next figures represent statistics between 2009 and 2013.

Figure 1: Production of fresh okra in countries supplying the EU, in tonnes



Source: [FAOSTAT](#)

Okra is cultivated in tropical, subtropical and warm temperate regions around the world. A clear growth in production can be seen in India (up 40% from 2009 to 2013), but smaller production countries such as Ivory Coast and Sudan (including South Sudan) are also increasing production steadily with respectively 15% and 4% over the same five-year period. India is responsible for 75% of the 8.4 million tonnes of okra produced globally, which is mainly destined for its domestic consumption. Faostat does not provide detailed production statistics for supplying countries such as Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic, nor for Thailand which, besides supplying Japan, also ships to Europe. In Europe, Cyprus produces around 2,000 tonnes of okra.

Research and production trials of hybrid varieties are expected to facilitate production in new regions. In Canada, where 6,000 tonnes of okra are imported annually, the [Vineland Research and Innovation Centre](#) is investigating several okra varieties for commercial production.

Consumption

In the European market, okra is primarily consumed mostly by African, Caribbean and Asian communities. The major market for okra and other Asian vegetables is the United Kingdom.

Okra is a popular vegetable in Indian communities, fried or cooked and used in curries and various other recipes. Caribbean communities use okra mostly in soups.

Tip:

- Work together with European importers to promote okra. Communicate recipes and different preparations of okra to inform new consumers.

What trends offer opportunities on the European market for fresh okra?

[CBI Trend mapping](#) provides you with general trends in the European market for fresh fruits and vegetables. This section provides more details about specific trends in the market in general, and for fresh okra.

Ethnic food: In northern Europe, especially in the UK, there is a trend towards the inclusion of ethnic vegetables by the large distribution chains, moving away from the traditional corner shops supplied by the wholesale market. This will open opportunities for exporters to add value (e.g. pre-packed and pre-cut fruits and vegetables), but will also increase the necessity to implement GLOBALG.A.P. certification (see also Buyer requirements below).

Attention to health food: Consumers in Europe are becoming more aware of health issues and pay more attention to their diet. Okra is often [promoted as a healthy vegetable](#) with [beneficial effects](#). The slimy texture of the vegetable does not appeal to a majority of the European consumers, but the health benefits can be a driver of further growth.

Growing interest in sustainable fruit: Consumption of fresh fruit in Europe is developing towards a more sustainable approach to production and processing. Environmental and social issues are becoming more and more important. Social and environmental certification schemes include actions to strongly reduce and register the use of pesticides, take action on the safety of employees and/or even include price guarantees for producers. Certification schemes that are in line with the [Global Social Compliance Program \(GSCP\)](#) will have a higher chance of being accepted by European supermarkets.

Tips:

- Communicate the health benefits of the fruit to help expand the European market. Be aware of [European Legislation on food health claims](#).
- Check the [Global Social Compliance Program \(GSCP\)](#) website for more information about social and environmental conduct.
- Promote fresh okra in Europe through instructions on how to store and prepare them. Many European consumers are willing to try 'new' products. Health, ease-of-use, price, and enjoyment are important principles that form the basis of consumer purchases.

What requirements should fresh okra comply with to be allowed on the European market?

Buyer requirements can be divided into (1) musts, requirements you must meet in order to enter the market, such as legal requirements, (2) common requirements, which are those most of your competitors have already implemented, in other words, the ones you need to comply with in order to keep up with the market, and (3) niche market requirements for specific segments.

For general information see also the buyer requirements for fresh fruit and vegetables on the [CBI Market Intelligence Platform for fresh fruit and vegetables](#).

Requirements you must meet

Pesticides

Pesticide residues are one of the crucial issues for fruit and vegetable suppliers. To avoid health and environmental damage, the EU has set maximum residue levels (MRLs) for pesticides in and on food products. Products containing more pesticides than allowed will be withdrawn from the EU market. Note that buyers in several Member States such as the UK, Germany, The Netherlands and Austria, use MRLs which are stricter than the MRLs laid down in EU legislation.

Food safety is a main priority in Europe. Some recent food scares have resulted in a great deal of attention for food safety among buyers (wholesalers and retail) and European consumers.

Tips:

- To find out the MRLs that are relevant for okra, use the EU [MRL database](#) in which all harmonised MRLs can be found. You can search on your product or pesticide used and the database shows the list of the MRLs associated to your product or pesticide. Read more about [MRLs in the EU Export Helpdesk](#).
- Reduce the amount of pesticides by applying [integrated pest management](#) (IPM) in production. IPM is an agricultural pest control strategy that includes growing practices and chemical management.
- Check with your buyers if they have additional requirements on MRLs and pesticide use.

Plant Health

Fruit and vegetables exported to the EU must comply with the EU legislation on plant health. The EU has laid down [phytosanitary requirements](#) to prevent introduction and spread of organisms harmful to plants and plant products in the EU. The requirements mainly imply that:

- Certain listed organisms are not allowed to be imported into the EU, unless specific circumstances apply. EU control measures are subject to change.
- Plants or plant products specified in Part B, Annex V of the Plant Health Directive [2000/29/EC](#) must be accompanied by a plant health certificate. A model phytosanitary certificate can be found through Annex VII of the Plant Health Directive.

Tips:

- Check with the relevant National Plant Protection Organisation (NPPO) or your EU importer what the requirements are for your product. Click [here](#) for a list of NPPOs
- Read more about [plant health in the EU Export Helpdesk](#).

Contaminants

Contaminants are substances that have not been intentionally added to food, but which may be present as a result of the various stages of its production, packaging, transport or warehousing. To avoid negative impact on the quality of food and risks to human health, the EU has set limits for several contaminants.

Tips:

- Find the relevant contaminant levels in the annex of [Regulation \(EC\) 1881/2006](#). All contaminants are presented and maximum levels are provided per product or groups of products.
- Find out more about prevention and reduction of lead Contamination in the [Code of Practice](#) published by the Codex Alimentarius.
- Check the European Commission's factsheet on food contaminants "[Managing food contaminants: how the EU ensures that our food is safe](#)" and read more about [contaminants in the EU Export Helpdesk](#).

Control of food imported to the EU

To ensure food safety and avoid environmental damage, the EU has restricted the use of certain chemicals in several Regulations and Directives. Your products will be subjected to official controls. These controls are carried out to ensure that all foods marketed in the EU market are safe, i.e. in compliance with the requirements applicable to them. There are three types of checks:

- Documentary checks
- Identity checks
- Physical checks

In the event of repeated non-compliance of specific products originating from particular countries, the EU can decide that controls will be carried out on an increased level or lay down emergency measures. Controls can be carried out at all stages of import and marketing in the EU. However, most checks are done at the points of entry in the EU.

Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein are not EU members, but are part of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Their food laws are to a large extent identical with EU legislation. However, some aspects of legislation may differ. In Switzerland, import checks are the responsibility of the [Swiss Customs Administration](#) and the [Federal Office of Public Health](#).

For okra from India, the EU adopted [Regulation no. 885/2014](#), demanding increased control due to continuous non-compliance and high levels of pesticide residues.

Tips:

- Familiarise yourself with the procedures before planning your exports to the EU. Failure to follow the right procedures could cause decrease and delay of orders, increase costs and result in actions by EU enforcement authorities.
- Make sure that the accompanying documents correspond (from A-Z!) with the food products contained in the consignment.
- Read more about [health control in the EU Export Helpdesk](#).
- Consult the [EU Export Helpdesk](#) for a full list of requirements for vegetables, including okra, selecting the product code: 07099990

Common buyer requirements

Certification as guarantee

As food safety is a top priority in all EU food sectors, you can expect most buyers to request extra guarantees from you in form of certification. [GlobalG.A.P.](#) is the most commonly requested food safety certification scheme, essential for exporting okras to the EU, especially via supermarkets. GLOBALG.A.P is a pre-farm-gate standard that covers the whole agricultural production process, from before the plant is in the ground to the non-processed product (processing not covered). Examples of other food safety management systems that can be required are British Retail Consortium ([BRC](#)) and International Food Standard ([IFS](#)), [FSSC22000](#) or [SQF](#). These management systems are additional to GLOBALG.A.P. and are recognised by the [Global Food Safety Initiative \(GFSI\)](#).

Tips:

- Check which Food safety management systems are most commonly requested in your target market. Expect GLOBALG.A.P. to be one of them.
- Read more on the different Food Safety Management Systems at the [Standards Map](#).
- As food safety is a major issue; work proactively with buyers to improve food safety and be transparent and up-to-date with buyer requirements and regulations.

Quality standards

The General EU Marketing Standards also apply to okras. EU buyers often require compliance with the standards of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe ([UNECE](#)) or the [Codex Alimentarius Commission](#) (CAC). It should be noted that quality refers to both food safety and food quality.

Tip:

- Make sure you supply the quality as agreed in the product specifications with your buyer.

Niche markets: Organic and Fair trade requirements

Organic, a growing niche market

An increasing number of EU consumers prefer food products that are produced and processed by natural methods. The market for organic okras is still small, but with a growing demand and limited supply. In order to market organic products in the EU, you have to use organic production methods according to [EU legislation](#). Furthermore, you have to use these production methods for at least two years before you can market the vegetables as organic. In addition, you (or your EU importer) must apply for an import authorisation from EU organic control bodies. After being audited by an accredited certifier, you may put the EU organic logo on your products, as well as the logo of the standard holder (e.g. [Soil Association](#) (especially relevant in the UK), [Naturland](#) (Germany) or [Bio Suisse](#) (Switzerland)). Some of these standards are slightly different, but they all comply with the EU legislation on organic production and labelling.

Tips:

- Implementing organic production and becoming certified can be expensive, so assess the market potential before making any investments.
- Consult the [Standards Map database](#) for the different organic certifications.
- For the export of organic okras into the European market, use a competent and specialised importer, who understands the market and knows the way into niche markets with their particular requirements.

Fair and sustainable

A small, but growing, niche market is the market for fresh products produced with more attention for on the social and/or environmental conditions in the producing areas. For okra social compliance is important, although product quality is top priority. Examples of social or sustainable labels for fresh fruit and vegetables are [Fairtrade](#) and [Fair for Life](#).

Importers may adopt initiatives which may impact you as a supplier. For example participating in a retailer initiative, such as the [Ethical Trading Initiative](#) (ETI) in the UK, or the [Business Social Compliance Initiative](#) (BSCI) in North-Western Europe.

Tips:

- Check your company's current performances. For example by doing a self-assessment on the [BSCI website](#).
- Consult the [Standards Map database](#) for more information and for differences between fair trade labels.

What competition do I face on the European fresh okra market?

For general information about market competitiveness for fresh fruit and vegetables you can have a look at the [Market Competitiveness information](#) available at the CBI market intelligence platform. The platform also provides the [Top tips for doing business with European buyers](#). This section provides information about the market competitiveness of the EU market for okra.

Company competition: Rivalry is fierce in the trade of vegetables. Suppliers of fresh vegetables to European retailers are not in a position to argue about the rules of the game. Buyers will switch easily to other suppliers if expectations are not met. However, in Europe okra is not a main vegetable for which fierce competition is common and there is no significant production. This slightly improves the position of exporters from developing countries.

Market entry: Entering the European market is a big hurdle for many companies because of certification and meeting both legal and non-legal requirements. In the market of ethnic food shops, the non-legal requirements such as GLOBALG.A.P. are not yet a must-have requirement, so there are opportunities for new exporters to enter the market without investing in certification schemes. However, requirements on MRLs and food safety remain a key issue. On the other hand EU importers are always looking for new sourcing areas with improved features (closer to the market, improved supply season, lower cost price, or additional certification). The power of the importers and traders of vegetables in Europe is high. They dictate requirements and switch easily to other suppliers if not satisfied about supplied quality or quantity.

Product competition: Inclusion of ethnic vegetables in the regular supermarket assortments stimulates the diversity of vegetable consumption in the EU, offering opportunities for products such as okra. Okra competes with other exotic, ethnic or lesser known vegetables, for example yardlong beans or bitter melons.

Tips:

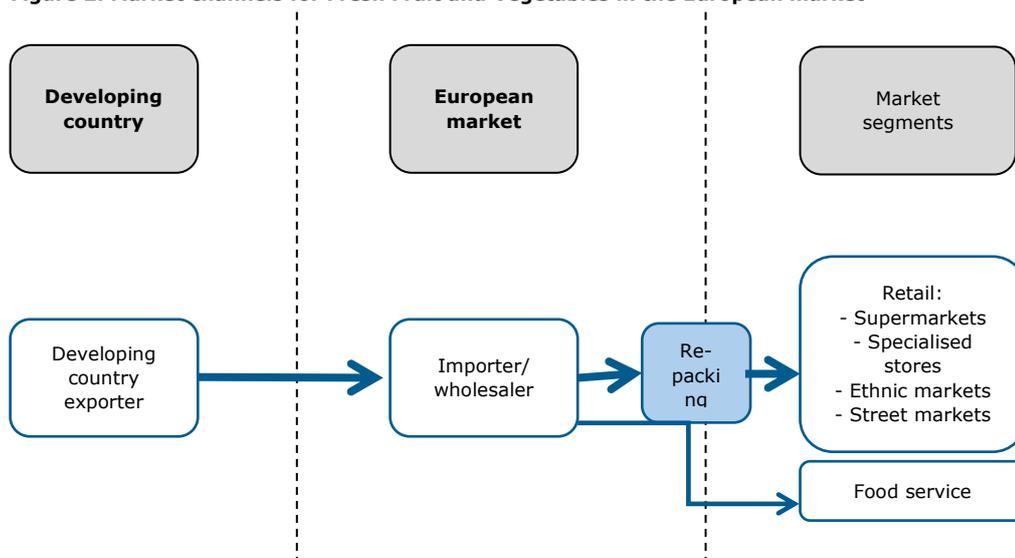
- Contact an experienced importer before entering the European market, especially if you are aiming for large retailers. It is expected that supermarkets will include ethnic vegetables in their regular assortment. However, delivering to supermarkets is very demanding in terms of buyer requirements.
- Do not compete on price alone, but build partnerships with buyers and strive for excellent product quality and handling.
- Establish a credible track record including transparent information on your company and product quality. Being part of a stable partnership and being a trustworthy supplier can help you to establish and maintain your position on the market.
- Use storytelling (e.g. show its origin and producer), novel packaging and premium quality as methods for setting your product apart.

What do the trade channels and interesting market segments look like in Europe for fresh okra?

For more general information about market channels and segments, you can have a look at the [Market Channels and Segments](#) available at the CBI market intelligence platform.

This section provides information about the various marketing channels through which okras are marketed in Europe.

Figure 2: Market channels for Fresh Fruit and Vegetables in the European market



Specialised importers: Exotic vegetables, as well as organics, are traded through specialist market channels. In typical trade hubs such as the Netherlands and Belgium there are various importers that have expertise in the trade of new exotic fruit and vegetables, including okra.

Importers/distributors differ in their relationship with the retail sector. Some are suppliers for private label products, others have their own brand, while others market the brand of a producer (cooperation).

Regional differences for tropical vegetables: In Europe, there are differences between the compositions of market channels. Northern countries like Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, and Belgium have a very dominant retail channel and tropical fruit is sold by large supermarkets. France and Spain go beyond that with large hypermarkets, alongside smaller specialist shops. Countries in the Alpine region, such as Switzerland and Austria, are more favourably disposed towards small local shops.

Ethnic segment: Okra is predominantly traded in the ethnic market segment and is sold in specialised stores aimed at African, Caribbean, and Asian communities. The market segments are supplied by importers that are specialised in sourcing ethnic and exotic fruit and vegetables from a variety of countries.

In the UK there are number of specialised wholesale markets that also have a wide variety of Ethnic vegetables for sale. Importers are often based in the vicinity of these markets.

Tips:

- Find your trade partner on trade fairs like [Fruit Logistica](#) or visit specialised wholesale markets such as [Rungis](#).
- Importers/distributors have their specific focus on each market segment, so choose an importer based on your assortment and on the size of your company or strategy.

What are end market prices for fresh okras?

Okra is a relatively stable market, but giving detailed information about prices is difficult. Export prices of okra stand at 4,000 US Dollars per metric tons CIF (Cost Insurance & Freight) but prices can go up to 5,000 to 5,600 US Dollars per metric ton CIF. Figure 3 gives an idea of added value for each step in the supply chain for fresh okra. Consumer prices can be expected to be between 7 and 14 euros per kilo.

Figure 3: Price breakdown for fresh okra

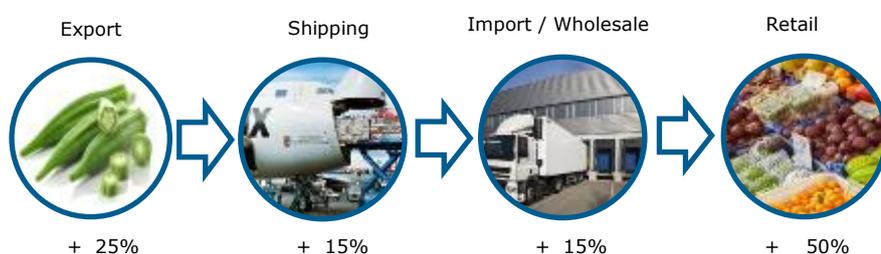


Figure 4: Retail price for fresh okra

	<p>Tesco</p> <p>Okra 175g</p> <p>£1.60 (British pounds) (Approx. €2.10)</p>
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Source: www.tesco.com/groceries (May 2016)

Useful Sources

Export and market entry support:

- CBI - <http://www.cbi.eu/>
- CBI market studies on fresh fruit and vegetables - http://www.cbi.eu/marketintel_platform/fresh-fruit-vegetables/136122/buyerrequirements
- EU Export Helpdesk - http://exporthelp.europa.eu/thdapp/index_en.html
- ITC - International Trade Centre of WTO and UN - <http://www.intracen.org/>
- SIPPO - <http://www.switzerland-ge.com/global/export/en/sippo-services>

Certification schemes:

- British Retail Consortium (BRC) - <http://www.brcglobalstandards.com/>
- BSCI - <http://www.bsci-intl.org/>
- FAIRTRADE - <http://www.fairtrade.net/>
- GLOBALG.A.P - http://www.globalgap.org/uk_en/
- ISEAL Alliance - <http://www.isealalliance.org/>
- ITC Standards Map - <http://www.standardsmap.org/>
- Rainforest Alliance - <http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/>

Marketing and trade standards:

- Codex Alimentarius - <http://www.codexalimentarius.org/codex-home/en/>
- European Food legislation - http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/eu-policy/legislation_en
- The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe - - <http://www.unece.org/trade/agr/standard/fresh/FFV-StandardsE.html>

Statistics and sector information:

- Agricultural Research for Development - <http://www.cirad.fr/en>
- Fruitrop - <http://www.fruitrop.com> (publication of CIRAD)
- Freshfel - <http://www.freshfel.org>
- Freshplaza - <http://www.freshplaza.com>
- European Statistics Eurostat - <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>
- FAOSTAT - <http://faostat.fao.org/>
- ITC Trade Map - <http://www.trademap.org/>
- United Nations Comtrade - <http://comtrade.un.org/>



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