

EU Invests in Program to Export Brazil's Lesser Known Fruits

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Ricardo Elesbão Alves, a researcher in the EMBRAPA (Brazilian Agricultural Research Company) Tropical Agroindustry unit, which is based in the northeastern state of Ceará, traveled this past weekend to Costa Rica to participate in a meeting of the program, "Adding Value to Underutilized Tropical Fruits with Great Commercial Potential," together with representatives from eight other countries.

The program, which is sponsored by the European Union, foresees an investment of 1.7 million euros over the next four years on research involving nine tropical fruits, three of which are Brazilian: açaí, cashews, and camu-camu.

According to Alves, who is coordinating the project in Brazil, the objective is to develop products that retain the plants' nutritional value.

"The fruits contain compounds that prevent free radicals, which cause the body to age, from building up in the organism. We want to identify these compounds and use the fruits to make products that will maintain these compounds in processed forms like juices and dried fruits."

The three fruits were chosen for their high nutritional value and economic potential. From the cashew, Alves explained, only the nut has export value, while the fruit practically goes to waste.

"But since cashew fruit is good for only two days, it can't be exported as is. It has to be in a processed form that maintains the quality of the fresh fruit," he added.

Besides cashews and açaí, camu-camu, which is native to the Amazon, was included in the project, because it contains "nearly 5% vitamin C, but only after this potential is scientifically proven will its market value be enhanced."

Alves mentioned the successful example of acerola, which a US firm in Ceará uses to make vitamin C capsules by a natural method of fruit dehydration developed by the EMBRAPA unit there.

The researcher emphasized that "most of the fruit is produced by small-scale growers, who will also be able to benefit from the project."

He went on to observe: "Since the supply chains are still informal and disorganized, we have problems with the quality and security of the products, and there has been no assessment of more adequate process technologies. This restricts the development of local agroindustries and access to the international market."

The funds earmarked for Brazil in the program are divided among three research centers: the EMBRAPA Tropical Agroindustry unit in Ceará, the EMBRAPA Food Agroindustry unit in Rio de Janeiro, and the EMBRAPA Eastern Amazon unit in Belém (PA).

The other institutions involved in research for the program are the Center of International Agricultural Research Cooperation for Development (CIRAD), in France; the Universities of Bonn (Germany), Ghent (Belgium), and Southampton (England); the National Center of Food Technology Research, in Costa Rica; the National Polytechnic School, in Ecuador; and the National Institute of Forest, Agricultural, and Livestock Research, in Mexico.

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