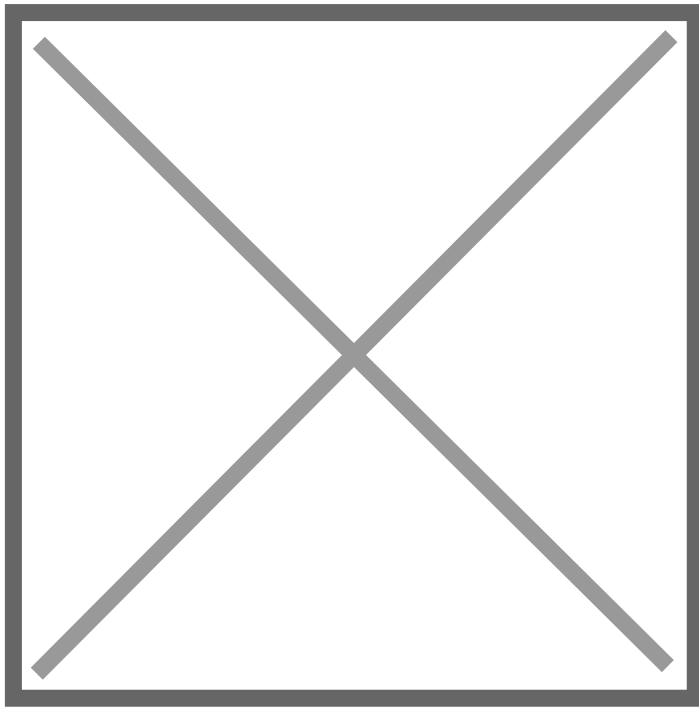


Unlocking horticulture's potential is key to transforming agrifood systems and delivering healthy diets for all

24 August 2026 | News

QU Dongyu spoke at the International Horticultural Congress in Japan underscoring the need for investment, innovation and stronger policies to boost the sector



Agriculture must move beyond a primary focus on producing sufficient quantities of food and place greater emphasis on providing the diverse and nutritious foods needed for healthy diets, FAO Director-General QU Dongyu said Monday, highlighting horticulture's contribution to better nutrition, resilient livelihoods and more sustainable agrifood systems.

"Success can no longer be measured simply by how much food we produce. It must also be measured by whether agriculture provides the foods that healthy societies require, and whether those foods are available, accessible and affordable for everyone," he told the International Horticultural Congress 2026 in Kyoto, pointing to the role of fruits, vegetables and other horticultural crops in healthy diets, biodiversity, climate resilience and livelihoods.

Between 2010 and 2024, fruit and vegetable production grew faster than cereals, and horticulture now makes up almost a quarter of global agricultural production value — about \$1.4 trillion. Exports grew roughly 2.6 percent annually over the

period, reaching 175 million tonnes worth \$240 billion by 2024. But, despite the economic success, this hasn't translated into healthier diets, the Director-General told the audience of scientists, policymakers, business representatives and producers.

Productivity, availability, affordability

The Director-General identified productivity, availability and affordability as three interconnected challenges to unlocking horticulture's full nutrition potential. Yields have grown less than one percent annually, lagging behind cereals amid underinvestment in research, genetics and infrastructure underlining the problem of productivity.

When it comes to availability, FAO's latest analysis shows that in 2023, only about half of countries produce enough fruits and vegetables to meet the FAO/WHO target of 400g per person daily. Average consumption is considerably lower, at an estimated 80 grams of fruit and 190 grams of vegetables per person per day globally. In terms of affordability, producer prices rose between 2016 and 2025 in 89 percent of countries for fruits and 93 percent for vegetables, with median annual increases of approximately 4.2 percent and 4.7 percent, respectively

Current trends point to significant gaps ahead. By 2050, projections suggest that fewer than one-third of countries in sub-Saharan Africa will have sufficient fruit and vegetable supplies to meet the joint FAO/WHO recommendation. With land and water resources increasingly constrained and climate change intensifying pressure through rising temperatures, water scarcity, extreme weather, pests and diseases, the Director-General called for investment in improved seed and planting material, healthier soils, efficient irrigation, mechanization and digital technologies, extension services, post-harvest systems and stronger links between producers and markets

The Director-General highlighted the importance of improving production efficiency. "Future growth must increasingly come from producing more with fewer resources," he said.

Innovation must reach farmers

Progress will require transformation, not just expansion, with farmers at the centre, the Director-General said. "No innovation, no policy and no investment will succeed without their knowledge, their confidence and their participation. Scientists and researchers' works must be recognized by farmers."

AI, genome editing and digital tools are accelerating breeding and cutting post-harvest losses, the Director-General said, citing work by the Joint FAO/IAEA Centre of Nuclear Techniques in Food and Agriculture on mutation breeding, which has contributed to more than 3,450 officially released crop varieties across over 70 plant species, including many fruits and vegetables. He called for innovation to be accessible, affordable and adoptable, particularly for small-scale producers, who supply much of the world's horticultural production.

Farms of 20 hectares or less account for over half of global fruit and vegetable output, rising to more than 80 percent in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. He also urged governments to support the sector through research, seed systems, infrastructure, trade policy and markets that reward quality and nutrition.

Combining tradition and innovation

The future should also draw on generations of traditional knowledge, the Director-General said and pointed to FAO's efforts in this area. "Nearly half of the 104 systems recognized under FAO's Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems involve horticulture, from jujube orchards in China's Jia County to date palms and olive groves in Egypt's Siwa Oasis and terraced farming in Peru's Andes."

The Director-General also highlighted the application of cutting-edge technologies as enablers to unlock the full potential of traditional crops and production methods during a Q&A session with the audience. He also stressed the need to guide consumers towards shifting their consumption patterns to adapt to changing scenarios and reduce food waste.

FAO is supporting these efforts through the Smart Farming approach and initiatives including the One Country One Priority Product initiative, the Hand-in-Hand Initiative and the Green Cities Initiative.

FAO's forthcoming report, Unlocking the Full Potential of Fruits and Vegetables Globally, expected in 2027, will examine trends in production, trade and consumption and address themes at the heart of the fruits and vegetables sector: livelihoods, health, productivity, plant health, seed supply and markets. Preliminary findings presented at a side event of the Congress point to an urgent need for action.