

# Sunflowers - A Blooming Market

Any native American crop that takes 373 years to come into its own has got to be called a late bloomer on the agricultural scene.

So it is with sunflowers. Grown by Indians in North Carolina for food before 1600 and raised by New England colonists for hair oil as early as 1615, sunflowers have had a long but relatively uneventful history in the United States.

Down through the decades most sunflowers that served more than a decorative function in U.S. gardens were raised for the confectionery and bird seed

markets, rarely for oil.

But while we in the United States weren't successful in getting yields of oil high enough to make sunflowers a profitable crop, researchers in the Soviet Union were.

The USSR desperately needed to find an oilseed crop which would grow successfully in a climate too cold for the traditional world leaders—soybeans, peanuts, and cottonseed. They hit upon, you guessed it, the sunflower—but they took the sunflowers we had improved through many years of breeding and achieved a

breakthrough which approximately doubled the oil content of the native American plant to where it ranged between 40 and 45 percent. Soybeans are only about 20 percent oil.

In 1966 we imported some of the high-oil Soviet sunflowers into the United States, and a year later commercial production for oil uses began on some 93,000 acres in the Red River Valley of Minnesota and North Dakota.

So much for the past. More important is the present and the future for oilseed sunflowers in the United States.

At present best estimates of U.S. sunflower plantings in 1972 put the total somewhere near 850,000 acres—the largest ever. And for the first time in history plantings of oil varieties topped those for confectionery and seed purposes—the ratio being about 3 to 1.

Minnesota and North Dakota usually plant about 85 percent of the Nation's crop—although sunflowers are getting more and more popular on the northern fringes of the Corn Belt where corn and soybeans historically have not performed exceptionally well.

In addition, oilseed sunflowers are also being grown in several Cotton Belt States where excess capacity in cotton oil mills is an inducement to provide oilseeds for crushing.

Of course, the ultimate test for high-oil sunflowers will be how well their costs and returns stack up against those for competing crops.

In the Red River Valley area production costs, based on estimates developed by the North Dakota Agricultural Extension Service, come to about \$23 to obtain present average yields of around 1,000 pounds an acre.

A recent study by the Economic Research Service indicates that at recent sunflowerseed price levels of 4 cents a pound, 1,000-pound-per-acre yields would make crop returns superior to those for flaxseed and equal to those for wheat not produced under allotment.

However, sunflower yields would have to rise to around 1,100 pounds to compete with soybeans and barley and to 1,900 to 2,000 pounds to compete with allotment wheat.

(The higher yields apparently are achievable with existing seed varieties and technologies. Some farmers in North Dakota already report sunflower yields of 2,000 pounds an acre and over and several Red River Valley farmers claim sunflowers are their No. 1 cash crop.)

In the Cotton Belt, production costs are estimated by ERS to total about \$40 to obtain present average yields of about 1,250 pounds an acre.



Compared with other major crops in the Cotton Belt area, if sunflowerseed sells for 4 cents a pound, per acre sunflower yields would have to be about 1,100 to 1,600 pounds to compete with cotton produced without government payments; 1,200 to 1,600 pounds to compete with sorghum raised under the feed grain program; and 1,600 to 2,000 pounds to compete with soybeans and with corn produced under the feed grain program.

In sunflowerseed sells for 5  
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