

Mushrooms

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mushroom business because he was "tired of plastering." Receipts were high during his first year in business but it bottomed out the following year, he related. Prices usually follow eight-year cycles, although the variation in these cycles has changed significantly in recent years. Depending on their size, and quality, mushrooms are currently selling for \$2.30 to

\$3.40 per three-pound box. Prices change from day to day, sometimes by as much as 30 cents. "It used to be that price fluctuations stayed within the five to 10-cent range," Kirk noted. The mushroom business has not been expanded much by small growers, as Kirk sees it. A few large corporations such as Clorox and Purina have gone into it, however - notably in Florida.



Judy Kirk, left, and Brenda Doss, display some of the mushrooms they were packing earlier this week for shipment to as far away as New York and Florida. Mushroom prices are up significantly from a year ago, and sales are booming this week because of the holidays. Sales and prices are likely to drop again after New Year's Day.

Growers in this part of Pennsylvania consider a crop of three pounds per square foot as "average or satisfactory," Kirk noted. He has grown as many as four pounds per square foot, but it's not as easily accomplished as it used to be. In fact, three pounds per square foot is sometimes hard to come by. The reason is disease, although this is a point disputed by others who are either directly or indirectly associated with the industry.

Frank Charlton, a mushroom hauler with 20 years of experience behind him, was loading baskets of mushrooms into his truck when this reporter visited the Kirk mushroom operation. Asked for his opinion of trends in the mushroom business, Charlton remarked "it's a lot harder to make a living with it now than it used to be."

Expressing a bit of bitterness over newly-enacted regulations, he questions the necessity of having mushroom growers go to school to learn how to use pesticides they've been using for years.

Aside from production costs which have risen significantly, the industry as a whole has been plagued for years by publicity-seeking reporters and politicians. "There's something mystic about mushrooms," one gentleman said, "and people respond to news about them." Such incidents, he observed, can launch an overly ambitious politician or public official into the limelight in a hurry while

simultaneously pushing mushroom sales into slumps. In his opinion the problem is one of overreaction and unscrupulous use of mushrooms as vehicles to big headlines.

Other factors to poor sales are imports and regulations. While southeastern Pennsylvania mushroom growers rely primarily on the fresh market, they do face competition from foreign canned products.

Kirk sells the bulk of his crop to fresh mushroom handlers, as opposed to canneries and soup manufacturers. Nevertheless, the soup market has a strong influence on fresh market prices, he said.

With 24,000 square feet of growing space, Kirk's operation is regarded as being smaller than average. He expanded to his present size (three double houses) within the first four years he was in business and has no immediate plans for additional buildings.

Growing mushrooms, the middle-aged former contractor explained, is not only hard work, but a business which requires exacting conditions. Temperatures within the houses, for example, must be maintained within a couple of degrees of the desired level. This requires the use of heating equipment and air conditioners - both expensive items in the costs of production ledgers.

Compost is pasteurized

Broilers increasing

HARRISBURG — Production of broiler chicks in Pennsylvania was on the increase for the week ending December 10 with placements of 1,336,000,


and the "casing soil" is sterilized to keep out undesirable organisms and provide the mushrooms with a favorable growth medium. In fact, the entire mushroom house is treated prior to each new crop to insure near-laboratory cleanliness.

according to the Crop Reporting Service.

Placements were eight percent above the previous week, but one percent below the corresponding week a year earlier.

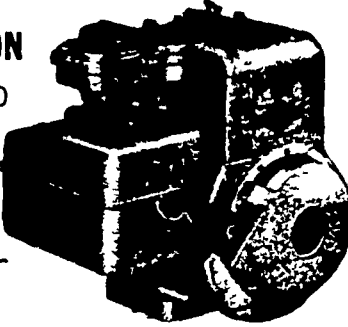
Average placements during the past ten weeks were six percent above a year earlier.

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