

Greenhouse tomato production on the upswing

NEWARK, Del. — Taste-conscious consumers tired of those pale, rubbery pink balls that make up the Winter tomato offering at many supermarkets are likely to pay a good bit more to get their hands on a vine-ripe tomato at this time of year. Delawareans who fit this category can take heart. Fresh greenhouse tomatoes will be available in many parts of the state starting in May. And the lush red orbs will be worth every cent of the price charged by local growers, assures University of Delaware Extension vegetable specialist Dr. Mike Orzolek.

Over the past three years, thanks in part to the efforts of Orzolek, there's been quite an increase in the production of greenhouse tomatoes in Delaware. Today there are about eight growers producing a total of around one acre of this crop. This may not seem like much, but on that single acre over the next few months they'll probably crank out between 50-75 tons of fruit (compared to an average yield of only 20-25 tons per acre from field-grown

plants). Most of these tomatoes will go to area retail stores, though some may be purchased directly from the grower.

Several factors have contributed to the growth and interest in greenhouse vegetable production in Delaware, says Orzolek. The cost of energy and transportation has increased the price of western and southern tomatoes distributed in this part of the country during Winter and early Spring months. Labor, with all of its problems, has also contributed to the cost of producing and distributing field tomatoes coming into the northeast. As a result, a number of local growers with access to nearby metropolitan markets where they'll have little or no transportation cost, have become interested in going into the production of greenhouse tomatoes.

While this can be a very profitable enterprise, it's not for everyone, cautions the vegetable specialist. Not everybody has the ability or the time needed to compete successfully with the less attractive but also less

expensive field-grown product shipped into the area during the off season.

In deciding whether to get into greenhouse tomato production, a grower must consider many things: Type of greenhouse, growing medium (soiless mix or hydroponics), ventilation and heating systems, production practices and, most important of all, marketing strategy. Lack of planning in any of these areas can result in crop failure or, more critically, total net loss.

Based on his experience in helping a number of growers get started in production, the specialist has several pieces of advice to offer.

For one thing, unless you have the skills to do the bulk of the repair and maintenance work on your equipment and greenhouse yourself, don't even consider going into this business. Repairs by professional people are not only expensive but also impossible to count on in terms of their availability. Tomatoes, both fruit and plants, are a perishable commodity. Anything unfavorable to

their growth — such as high heat, lack of moisture, excess fertilizer, low pH — will reduce yields or cause plants to die. Therefore, all systems must be operable and in use 24 hours a day. When a problem occurs, repairs must be made within hours of the breakdown if a loss is to be avoided.

Another common problem in greenhouse operations is control of the pH and salt content of the growing medium. Deviation from a

pH range of 5.8 to 6.6 and high salt levels in excess of 2000 parts per million can result in poor plant growth, yellow leaves, flower drop, poor fruit development, or all of the above. For this reason, most growers monitor the pH and salt level of their growing medium on a daily or weekly basis.

Plants for the present greenhouse tomato crop were set out in February or March. Harvest period

ranges from mid-May up to August or September. Some people pull their plants after the first of July because of developing competition from locally grown field tomatoes. But right now there are growers all over the state — in Millsboro, Delmar, Felton, and Newark, among other places — all of them producing tons of juicy red tomatoes guaranteed to make a salad-lover's mouth water.

Concern for farmers voiced

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Two national leaders have expressed concern for economic problems facing family farmers.

Bishop Maurice J. Dingham of Des Moines, Iowa, president, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and Allan Grant, president, American Farm Bureau Federation, said the cost-price squeeze is causing serious problems for current farmers and is making it difficult for young people to enter agriculture.

They urged established farmers, lending institutions and government agencies to continue to help and look for new ways to assist young farmers in getting started in agriculture.

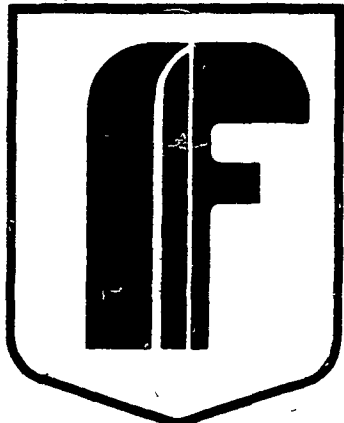
They emphasized that inflation and other economic pressures are making it difficult for present family farmers to obtain an adequate return for their labor and investment. Among the topics discussed was the interrelationship of

technology and spiritual values.

The joint statement developed out of a recent meeting of the two leaders in Des Moines. Bishop Dingham of the Southwest Iowa Diocese is chairman of the church's organization that reflects a religious viewpoint on rural issues.

The two leaders had an amicable discussion and agreed to continue to communicate their common concerns and interests in the welfare of family farmers.

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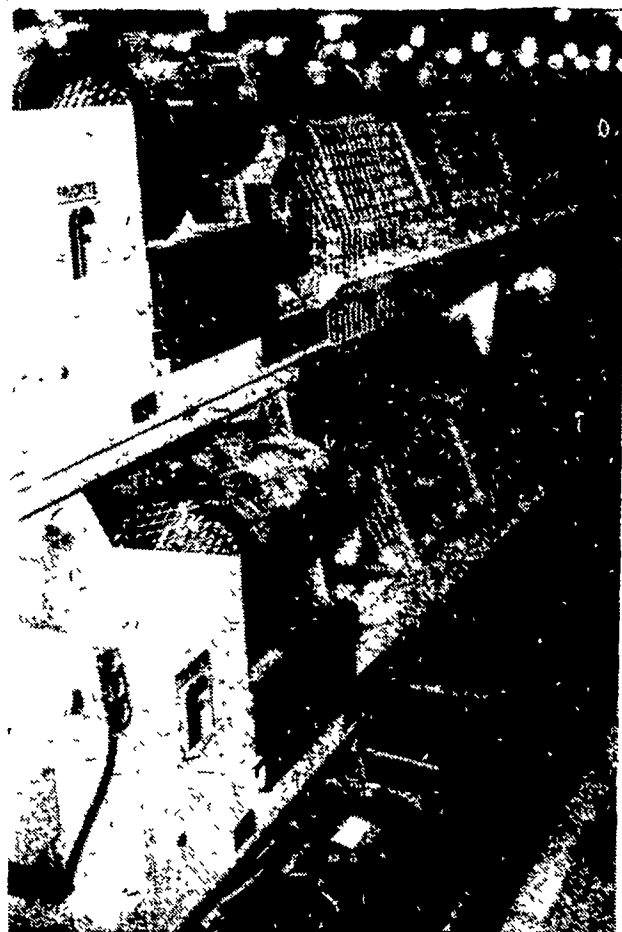


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