

Vegetables seen as way to boost Del. farm income

DOVER, Del. — Delaware farmers who want to improve their income should consider growing vegetables in addition to their present enterprises, says University of Delaware extension economist W. T. McAllister.

While the idea won't appeal to everyone, it can be profitable because of favorable growing conditions and closeness to major metropolitan markets, he says.

By raising fruits and vegetables as well as corn and soybeans, some growers could well increase their farm income enough to bring another family member into the business.

Because vegetables offer the opportunity for high returns on small acreage, they're a good option for the young farmer who's long on ambition and short on capital.

They're also a good bet for well-established farmers who want to make more money.

McAllister, who spoke about Delaware's advantages as a vegetable-producing state during the recent annual meeting of the Delaware Potato and Vegetable Growers' Associations in Denver, considers the Delmarva peninsula a "land of economic opportunity for agriculture."

He says the area is well-suited to many kinds of agricultural production, including fruits and vegetables. The land is flat, open and easily tilled. The growing season is fairly long.

Although rainfall is spotty and unreliable, it totals between 40 to 50 inches most years. This is enough to keep ground water levels high—especially under the sandy soils of Sussex County—so irrigating crops has not been a problem.

Some of the fresh-market crops presently grown in Delaware are snap beans, sweet corn, peppers, Irish potatoes, eggplant, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, cucumbers, peas, limas, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, spinach, asparagus, horseradish, squash, cantaloupes, watermelons, strawberries, peaches, apples, and blueberries.

It's also possible to grow lettuce and other greens, radishes, onions, turnips, beets, carrots and other root crops. Many of these thrive in

cool weather and could be used to extend the growing season.

What makes the outlook especially bright for Delaware produce growers these days are the fresh-market opportunities, says the economist.

One fifth of the total population of the United States—50 million people—lives within 300 miles of Dover. Within a 200-mile radius are 19 million potential customers for Delaware-grown fruits and vegetables. Within 10 miles—an easy one-day haul—live 14 million people.

This is the most concentrated market any place in the country," says McAllister. "If you don't want to take advantage of the opportunity, that's entirely up to you. But it's there."

He sees the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast as a large deficit market for many things Delaware farmers now produce, or could produce. By "deficit" he means that growers in the Northeast don't currently raise enough to satisfy demand. As a result, farmers in the South, Midwest and far West consider the industrial Northeast a prime market for what they grow.

Rising transportation costs are changing that picture, however. Back in 1976 the average cost of hauling produce to market by tractor trailer type trucks was 58¢ cents per mile. By February 1980 that cost had jumped to 95¢ cents. That's a 62 percent increase in only four years.

Rates continue to go up. Truck rates are no cheaper for Delmarva farmers. But the distance to market is much shorter. This gives them a distinct competitive advantage.

Take the cost of shipping produce to New York City by truck, for instance.

Hauling costs from Tampa to New York—a distance of 1200 miles—rose \$439 between 1976 and 1980. Over the same period, the cost of shipping winter and early spring vegetables, cantaloupes, and other fruits 2500 miles from Phoenix to New York went up nearly \$1000.

The cost to bring a truckload of produce all the way from Los Angeles rose by about \$1200.

One reason the Delmarva broiler

industry has been able to hold its own against competition from other parts of the country is this same closeness to market. What is saved on transportation compensates for higher production costs and keeps local companies competitive, explains the economist.

Delaware farmers may have excellent market prospects, but no one's likely to come begging for what they grow, he warns.

"There aren't any chain store buyers or wholesalers sitting around waiting for what you produce," he says.

"If you want a place in these markets you're going to have to create it by being competitive in all that you do. First, you must

know what the market wants. Second, you've got to produce that particular item competitively in terms of price, quality, service and all the other things that either attract a buyer or turn him off."

It's not enough to be able to do this, either. The product also has to be sold in the many ways to do business.

Just as production is a science, so is marketing.

McAllister considers it rare to find both sciences wrapped up in one person or one family.

"I think in many cases farmers do an excellent job growing the product, but they're not always equally skilled in selling it," he says.

"That's why I think you need

someone or some group to help you with marketing, if you're interested in producing it in large quantities and moving it into metropolitan areas.

"Your market connection may be an aggressive local broker who has good knowledge and contacts," he says, "or an organization like the auctions in Laurel and New Jersey. It could be a strong group like the Delaware Produce Growers Association or some other organization or expert who can help you penetrate the market."

Until you've succeeded in doing this, from the standpoint of profits, it doesn't really matter how good you are at growing the stuff. But the opportunities are there, and they're excellent, he concludes.

Septic tanks need help to do their job

NEWARK, Del. — If you live in a rural area, chances are you're served by a septic system. Does this sewage disposal system serve just as adequately as the sewer system in town?

Septic tank systems generally do a good job, says Delaware extension agricultural engineer Ernest Walpole. However, septic system owners should keep a few precautions in mind. If you have a stopped-up drain, use the recommended dosage of drain opener but no more. Moderation is the watchword with a septic system, he explains.

The effluent in a septic tank is broken down by bacterial action. Most solids are broken down into liquids and gasses. As new material enters the tank through household drains, an equal volume of digested material overflows the tank and enters the perforated tile of the seepage bed, where it filters out through the upper layers of the soil.

There is always a small percentage of material that won't break down. This collects as a layer of solid sludge on the bottom of the septic tank. Depending on the size of your household and whether or not you have a garbage


disposal unit feeding into the system, the tank should be pumped out every three to five years to prevent it from plugging up the perforated tile and backing up the system.

Are septic tanks safe? Yes, explains Walpole, since laws protect the public health by controlling minimum distances between septic tanks, and minimum distances between tanks and wells. And since not all soils are suitable for septic tanks, the law now requires percolation tests before a septic system is installed. The percolation test determines whether the soil has the capacity to filter out harmful substances so that they won't enter the groundwater.

Though percolation tests weren't required years ago, if you have an older septic tank, you needn't

worry. And problems would have shown up long ago, says Walpole. If your house was built within the last five years, you can be sure that a percolation test was performed.

In some areas septic tanks tend to get waterlogged during periods of high water table, especially during the spring of the year. You can recognize this problem if the household drains empty very slowly. The lines are already full of water, so the waste has nowhere to go. At times like this, says Walpole, you're smart to minimize the amount of waste water you put into the system. Take shorter showers, don't flush the toilet unnecessarily, and consider taking out the garbage the old fashioned way instead of putting it down the garbage disposal unit.



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