

Seed growouts assure correct labeling

WASHINGTON, D.C. — To the casual observer, Wilbur Anderson's field of cabbage and peas in Washington state is fairly ordinary.

Dan Cantliffe's Florida plantings of cucumber, squash and watermelon or Darrell Morey's wheat and rye fields in Georgia also appear ordinary.

But they aren't ordinary.

All three plantings are part of a network of open-air laboratories maintained by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and cooperating states to help ensure that seed is labeled and sold by its correct variety name.

Cantliffe, Anderson and Morey are all corn specialists who spend

part of their time working with USDA to check the accuracy of seed labeling as to variety.

"Correct variety labeling of seed is critical in today's market," says Don Ator, chief of the Seed Regulatory Branch of USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. "To check the accuracy of seed labeling — we grow the seed —

seeing is believing."

As recently as 30 years ago, people had few improved varieties to choose from. Today there are thousands of varieties of field crops, vegetable crops and turf grasses. Each variety is developed for specific growing conditions or for specific end product uses. Soil, weather, geography, disease-

resistance, and intended use all are factors in deciding which varieties to plant. Choice of variety can make the difference between crop success or failure.

"If seed is incorrectly labeled farmers or home gardeners won't get the crop they planned," Ator said.

Variety testing is one part of a program to enforce the Federal Seed Act, a truth-in-labeling law intended to protect farmers and home gardeners who buy seed. USDA has seed test sites in 11 states.

State seed regulatory officials draw seed samples for germination and purity testing and send them to USDA, Ator said. The samples are taken at farm supply stores, hardware stores, super markets, warehouses—anywhere seed is sold.

"The sample seeds are carefully nurtured according to recommended practices for the crop being tested," Ator said. "Each seed lot under scrutiny is compared with a control sample to determine if it is the variety claimed. If not, distinguished characteristics of the plants are recorded and photographed to document the fact that the plants are not the variety named on the seed label."

"We find about five percent of the samples tested this way are mislabeled," Ator said. "Test results on offtypes are referred to USDA field agents and state seed control officials who pursue each case by checking records of companies involved."

The seed company then may be cited with a violation of the Federal Seed Act or of state seed laws.

"Sometimes a warning is sufficient," Ator said, "we could also take stronger measures — such as penalty action with a fine."

"There are many instances where variety mislabeling could result in financial losses," Ator said. "For example, a farmer growing barley for brewing could be damaged if the wrong variety is planted and the crop doesn't meet the standards required by the brewer."

"Home gardeners also can be hurt by mislabeling," Ator said. "It's frustrating to plan for one crop and get another. Paying a premium price for a special variety is a waste of money if the seed purchased is not true to the information on the label."

"Farmers and gardeners already have enough risks to deal with — weather, disease, markets. They shouldn't have to risk planting the wrong variety of seed," he said.

Proper seed labeling can't be taken for granted, Ator said. "Mislabeling can happen through human error, such as a simple switching of tags from one seed lot to another, or attaching the wrong tag to seed," he said. "Seed can be contaminated in the harvesting or cleaning process if equipment isn't completely clear of one variety of seed before the next one is run."

Seed varieties also can be contaminated or changed by foreign pollen, by volunteer plants, or by genetic shifts due to environmental factors. And, Ator said, seed varieties may be deliberately mislabeled as a marketing tool. For example, a variety of seed could be sold by one seed dealer to another. The second dealer might rename the variety to enhance sales.

"This not only is illegal," Ator said, "it further confuses what is already a complex marketing business. The consumer doesn't have a choice as to variety when these practices prevail."



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