

Economists to study Delaware food buying habits

NEWARK, Del. — Two economists at the University of Delaware Agricultural Experiment Station have announced plans to survey Delawareans about their food buying attitudes as part of a study of the state's retail food industry.

Questionnaires should be mailed this summer to a random sample of resident in Sussex, Kent and New Castle counties. If funds are available, the researchers may also conduct in-store personal interviews with shoppers. The series of studies will probably take

three years to complete.

Dr. R. Dean Shippy and Dr. Ulrich C. Toensmeyer say the overall goal of their project is to determine how effectively current and emerging food retailing practices are meeting the needs of Delaware consumers. Better

understanding of shopper preferences would also help area farmers tailor production to local demand.

Specifically, the economists want to find out (1) how responsive Delaware food stores are to shopper preferences for product type and size; (2) how satisfied consumers are with current selections of convenience foods available in local stores; and (3) consumer attitudes toward pricing accuracy of electronic scanners and universal product codes as well as automatic checkout procedures in general.

Among other things, Shippy and Toensmeyer are looking for information on shopper packaging preferences for various meat and poultry cuts and major fruits and vegetables; attitudes toward bulk versus prepackaged food products; acceptance of generic versus branded grocery products; and attitudes toward locally produced agricultural products.

Area farmers and food retailers need such information in order to develop effective marketing strategies, the agricultural economists say. For example, knowledge of preferred package sizes for major fresh fruits and vegetables could give Delaware produce growers a basis for evaluating the economics of various package sizes for roadside stands, small stores and super-

markets.

Groceries are big business these days. In 1984 national retail food store sales approached \$279.3 billion, with sales in the Northeast accounting for well over 20 percent of that figure. A 1982 survey of Delaware food stores and restaurants showed sales of roughly \$555 million in the state.

In 1983 national per capita spending at retail food stores averaged \$1,109. During that same year, the average Delawarean spent \$1,093 on food at the grocery store.

Because of their size, power and strategic position, food retailers are considered the gatekeepers of the food industry. They make many major marketing decisions for the entire industry. In essence, they serve as consumer purchasing agents, and as such, control one of the most important food marketing sources — the shelf space which is vital to the success of farmer, food manufacturer and food wholesaler marketing efforts.

In the long run, however, it's the consumer who calls the shots, say Shippy and Toensmeyer. "How consumers buy food has shaped the modern food retailing picture," they say. "Consumer willingness to shop around, compare values and make store, product and brand substitutions determines the competitive intensity of food markets."

Don't let space stop you from gardening

CREAMERY — Many potential gardeners miss all the joy of growing plants because they don't have access to garden soil or space. Luckily, they can grow fresh, high-quality vegetables in the smallest spaces.

A few containers and some specially-bred container varieties will produce a very attractive kitchen garden all summer, says County Agent Paul Reber.

How small a container is large enough for growing tomatoes, lettuce, peppers or spinach? "Container size has little relation to growth, except for some of the root crops like carrots and beets that penetrate and spread out," Reber says.

"The biggest factor in small-space gardening is the moisture of small containers. Small containers will dry out much faster, and each plant must have a constant supply of moisture and nutrients to produce well."

The real secret to successful container gardening is frequent watering and good drainage of excess water, Reber says. Prior to planting, make certain there are holes in the bottom or on the sides

near the bottom of the container. Contrary to popular belief, a layer of gravel or other porous material in the bottom of the container does not improve drainage. In fact, this layer will actually shorten the soil column in the container and retard drainage. Simply cover the drain holes with a small piece of screen to hold the soil mixture.

Container choice is limitless. Use your imagination, Reber says. Garden centers feature a wide selection of wooden and plastic boxes, baskets and tubs. Some gardeners use old tires to create a raised bed for cucumbers or melons. (Old tires aren't the best looking container, but foliage will hide them in a short time.) Plastic trash cans are ideal for tomatoes, and hanging baskets work well for leaf lettuce.

Another advantage of growing vegetables in containers is that you can move them for better sun exposure or more space. Moving the containers is easier if one of the many available lightweight soil mixes is used. Some brands come with added starter nutrients for

your plants. A slow-release fertilizer can be incorporated into the mix to extend its plant-feeding qualities. These mixes can be used directly from the bag with no other additives needed. Most garden centers and plant supply outlets handle one or more brands.

Unless you are blessed with very good quality garden soil, avoid using straight soil in a container garden. It is too heavy, and may contain weed, seed or disease organisms to hamper the crop. The drainage of soil in a container is often much poorer than what is found under natural conditions in the field. A wet root system in a container will spell disaster.

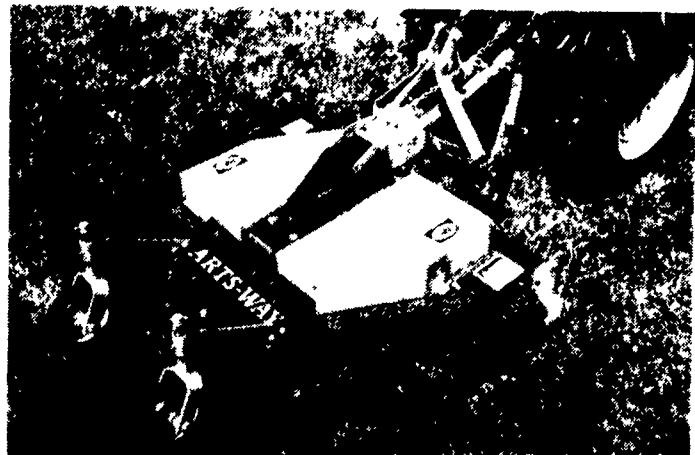
If you combine the correct plant type with the growing medium and container, you can't miss. Many seed companies have bred and developed compact varieties of plants suited for container growing. Look on the seed packet or ask the grower.



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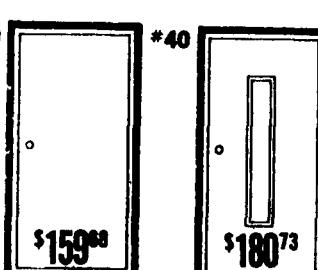
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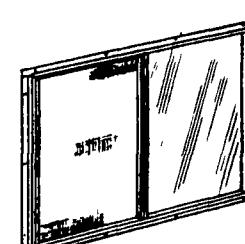
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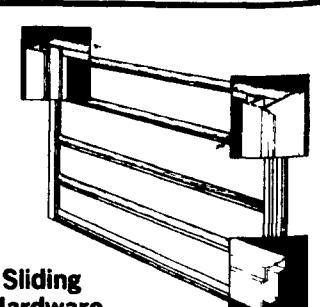
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