

Canola oil: a cash crop for Northeast?

ITHACA, NY — Farmers in New York and other northern states across the country might want to cash in on a potential new oilseed crop that thrives in colder growing climates, according to researchers at Cornell University.

Canola seeds are used to produce a vegetable oil similar to soybean oil, and are already a popular cash crop in Canadian provinces and in parts of northern Europe.

In cooperation with the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, Cornell researchers are testing canola for its adaptability to northern states such as New York. The results of those tests will be used to compile a store of information, which will be made available to interested growers through Cornell Cooperative Extension agents.

Cornell's research into the viability of canola seed farming is funded in part by a \$6,000 grant from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, which will continue funding that research at a higher level in 1986.

Under the guidance of Cornell researchers, canola seed was successfully grown this year on five farms in New York State.

"We're trying to learn enough about the crop so that we can give

sound advice to farmers who are thinking of growing it," says Madison J. Wright, a professor of agronomy in the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell. "We're trying to build up the familiarity of farmers and Cooperative Extension agents so they'll know how to grow the crop and market it."

Unlike many crops, canola will thrive in colder growing climates. Canola grown in warmer areas gives lower yields and produces an inferior quality oil.

There are already existing markets for canola oil in Canada and overseas, but "the Canadian market in Ontario is the only one accessible to us."

Canola oil is a popular food and cooking oil in Canada. Much of the canola is grown in Canada's central prairie provinces, but the

cost of shipping the canola east to the populous Ontario province opens a market for nearby New York farmers, Wright explains.

As for American markets, the future is uncertain. The use of canola for human consumption was approved by the Food and Drug Administration just one year ago.

Canola plants are actually the result of Canadian plant breeding efforts, Wright says. These plants were developed by eliminating undesirable traits from the seeds of the rapeseed plant.

Rapeseed oil is laden with erucic acid, and the meal from rapeseeds is high in glucosinolates. Erucic acid has caused abnormal growths in the hearts of laboratory animals, and the glucosinolates are unpalatable and are believed to cause goiter.

The canola plants are essentially rapeseed plants that produce no erucic acid and glucosinolates, Wright explains; they differ only chemically.

According to Wright, the future of canola seed as a viable crop in the U.S. depends on the development of American markets, not foreign ones.

"In the short term, we will be able to sell canola to Ontario processing plants until Canadian farmers fill the gap. In the long term, there will have to be a market in the United States if the crop is going to be important," Wright says.

A major stumbling block to the development of an American canola market is that canola oil is similar to soybean oil, which is readily available from the abundant U.S. soybean crop.

"Canola oil is also similar to other well-established vegetable oils, such as corn oil, cottonseed oil, and sunflower oil, among others," Wright adds. "In addition, the meal, which contains about 35 percent protein, competes with soybean meal in the livestock feed market." About 50 percent of the canola seed harvest is used for meal once the seeds have been pressed for oil.

Canadians have progressed with canola production because their climate is too cold for soybeans.

"Canola is not adapted to the warmer parts of the United States. If it is going to be grown at all, it will have to be grown in the northern fringe of states," Wright says. "What we are trying to do at Cornell is to develop a set of facts about the crop so farmers can make informed decisions."

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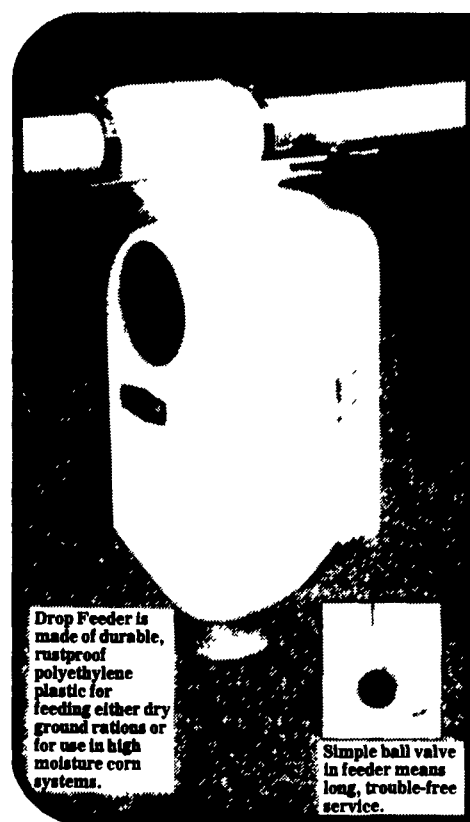
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