

Vegetable grower calls for quality, not quantity

BY JACK HUBLEY
HERSHEY — American farmers are over-achievers.

American farmers are under-achievers.

Although these two statements seem contradictory, both are true, say vegetable growers Dale and Kathy Whitenight of Danville.

As with virtually all agricultural commodities, the production end of vegetable farming has been an onward-and-upward story. Marketing efforts, however, have fallen short.

As the owners and operators of Whitenight's Farm Market, Dale and Kathy find themselves immersed in all phases of the business from planting to finding a home for their produce. While Kathy runs the market and keeps the books, Dale keeps the shelves stocked with a wide variety of vegetables from the farm's 275 acres. The couple also added greenhouses in an effort to supply the bedding plant market.

The immediate past-president of the Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers Association, Dale finds that most farmers seem to have two weaknesses. "We don't like to keep records, and we don't like to sell what we produce," he observes. "If we didn't have such a dislike for bookkeeping, we'd know what it costs to produce, and know how foolhardy it is to overproduce, and thereby would have corrected some of the problem by this time," says Whitenight.

From a production standpoint, less can actually be more, says Dale. As an example, he recalls the drought that hit Pennsylvania growers three years ago. With yields down and demand steady, the cabbage market took wing. "We happened upon a \$9-a-crate cabbage market during the time the season when \$3.50 was acceptable," Whitenight remembers. Despite the fact that the drought cut his yield in half, the season still ended in the black. "If you have to use only half the boxes and you come out better off," Dale says.

But these market conditions were too good to last. With inflated cabbage prices making headlines, other growers felt compelled to

cash in on the temporary windfall by planting more cabbage. "I'm not aware of there ever being a another very good year following a very good year," Whitenight says.

Another factor that augments the overproduction problem, says Whitenight, is the flood of vegetables being produced by weekend farmers who can afford to give away their products. "I'm talking about the guy whose agricultural income would not affect his standard of living. He has another job and he's farming just for the fun of it," says Dale.

Whitenight's proposed approach to the problem is straightforward. "License him. If you want to be a producer, then you make some kind of commitment to that end," he says. "It's the age of specialties, and food production is no less of a specialty than many other things."

One of the reasons that the backyard grower must resort to virtually giving his produce away



Dale Whitenight

is that he doesn't have the volume of produce or the knowledge necessary to be able to locate favorable wholesale markets when the local retail market bottoms out, says Kathy. "If you're not doing it on a fulltime basis, you don't know those outlets," she points out. "So you put it down on the wagon in the yard and that's where the problem starts."

Co-ops are another promising method for marketing produce, but membership in a co-op is no guarantee that the producer will receive higher prices. "The co-op concept is good," says Dale, "but producers have to really support it, and you need a good manager."

But whether vegetables are trucked to distant wholesale markets or sold in the producer's roadside market, Pennsylvania growers must become better handlers, Dale says. Unlike the more arid western states, Pennsylvania's humid climate reduces the shelf life of most produce, necessitating the use of fast cooling to slow down the quality-robbing respiration process in vegetables. Whitenight's hydrocooling unit provides an ice water bath for his freshly picked

produce and greatly enhances its quality and shelf life.

"Some of the best money to be had is in direct sales, primarily to the chains," he points out. "And the chains are demanding that kind of preparation." As an example, Dale notes that, while a crate of precooled, top-iced corn might be worth five to six dollars, the same product taken from the stalk straight to a burlap bag may be worth little more than two dollars.

But providing a quality product is only half the answer, says Dale, pointing out that even though the Department of Agriculture has made strides in the field of promotion within the past five years, vegetable promotion still lags far behind that of many other agricultural commodities. The Whitenights both agree that promotion provides the foot in the door for the vegetable grower.

"The first order of business in producing anything is to sell it. You sell it before you buy the seed," concludes Dale. "If you don't know where the market is, you're going to be hurting. And you're going to have a lot of other people upset."

Junior Holstein calf raffle underway

The Pennsylvania Junior Holstein Association's 6th Annual Calf Raffle is in high gear. Juniors are out selling tickets to help fund the many programs and activities sponsored by the Pennsylvania Junior Association.

This year's outstanding calf is Pen-Col Rotate Jr Miss-ET. She comes from Pen-Col Farms, Millville. She is an Arlinda Rotate heifer born September 25, 1985. Her dam is a Milestone scored VG-88 with an Excellent Mammary. Her best record is 30,619M 4.2% 1296f. The next two dams are both over 26,000m and 1000f.

The winners will be selected at the Pennsylvania On Parade Spring Sales, March 28, 1986, Harrisburg, PA. The first prize winner has the option of taking the calf or a cash prize of \$1,000. Second prize is \$250 and third prize is \$100.

Pennsylvania Juniors greatly benefit from the Calf Raffle. Trips,

Judging Schools, Production Contests, DJM Contests, and many other Junior Programs are funded from the Calf Raffle sales.

To receive your six Calf Raffle tickets, simply send a check for \$5.00 to Pennsylvania Holstein Association, 839 Benner Pike, State College, PA 16801. Please include your name, address, and phone number.

Schuylkill County fruit meeting

POTTSVILLE — The Schuylkill County Fruit Growers meeting will be held on Wednesday, February 12, 1986, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the Dusselink Motor Inn, Route 61, Pottsville.

Speakers for the meeting will be Winand Hock, Pesticide Program Specialist; Ed Rajotte, Extension

Entomologist; Rob Cassweller, Extension Pomologist; and James Travis, Extension Pathologist.

All fruit growers are invited to attend this meeting sponsored by the Schuylkill County Cooperative Extension Service. Penn State is an affirmative action, equal opportunity university.

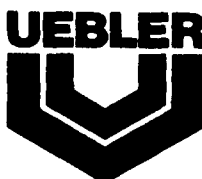


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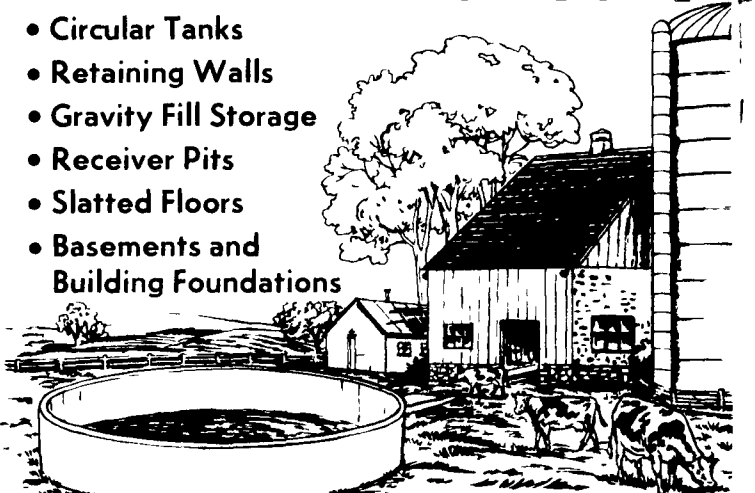
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