

Farmers Turn To Vegetables As Cash Crop Alternative

(Continued from Page A1)
vegetable grower himself, also sees an increased interest in vegetable production. "A large number of farmers are interested in growing vegetables," he said. However, he added, "It's difficult to gauge how much is in response to the tobacco."

A ready market and the potential for healthy returns are other incentives prompting farmers to take a second glance at peppers, tomatoes and melons. While the profit potential varies from vegetable to vegetable, a farmer can expect to net at least as much from an acre of vegetables as from an acre of tobacco. Extension personnel and vegetable growers estimate the profit potential at between \$1,000 and \$10,000 per acre, depending on the farmer's skill, the weather and the vegetable variety and quality.

In a good year, Irwin said, a tobacco farmer can gross about \$1,500 per acre given a market offering \$1 per pound and production at 1,500 pounds per acre. This year, if a farmer was able to sell his tobacco for 75 cents, he made about \$1,100 per acre.

Donald Robinson, adult farmer instructor for Eastern Lancaster County School District, listed the following gross figures on vegetable test plots grown in eastern Lancaster County: tomatoes, \$20,000 per acre with production at 55 ton per acre; peppers, \$10,000 per acre; processed tomatoes with contracts, \$2,000 per acre; and cauliflower and broccoli, \$3,000 per acre.

Tomatoes, peppers and melons are the most popular vegetables in the county. "Cantaloupes seemed to be the thing to bring our people to the vegetable market," Robinson noted.

But, while cantaloupes are fine for farmers who market them at roadside stands, they do not store or ship well, A person cautioned. Farmers are wise to grow vegetables that will not bruise easily or spoil quickly, he advised.

Other vegetables grown in the county include broccoli, cauliflower, cucumbers, strawberries, eggplants, squash, watermelons, sweet corn, cabbage, asparagus, pumpkins, sweet and Indian corn.

In making the transition from tobacco to vegetables, a farmer should consider the amount of labor he has available. Like tobacco, vegetables are a labor-intensive crop, requiring a great deal of attention during certain times of the season. "It's pretty demanding," says Robert Todd, sales manager for Dutch Valley Growers, a vegetable cooperative. "When it's ripe, it's ripe."

Vegetables are at least as much work as tobacco, with the labor concentrated during the growing season. With tobacco, the work stretches out over the year. "Many of the vegetable crops are somewhat comparable to tobacco as far as labor level," says Stoltzfus. A few crops, like melons, are less labor intensive, while others, such as staked tomatoes, are more.

Because of the labor involved, local farmers often limit their vegetable acreage to an acre or two. Todd said most members of Dutch Valley have between one and three acres, with a few having as much as 50 acres. However,

those with large acreage are the exception, rather than the rule, he explained. Most members depend on family labor and neighbors at harvest time.

Marketing options are another important consideration for farmers weighing the advantages of vegetables. Farmers in Lancaster County have three main choices: the Leola Auction, Dutch Valley Growers Cooperative, or roadside stands.

Entering into its fourth season, the auction is a major market for fresh, quality vegetables. Starting in mid-May with cold crops like cauliflower, broccoli and asparagus, the auction attracts buyers from grocery stores and farmer's markets within a 50 mile radius.

"The auction has pretty much proven itself as a viable market for the fresh vegetable crop," Stoltzfus notes. In its first year, the auction did about \$500,000 in business; last year that figure mushroomed to over \$1 million.

About 300 to 400 farmers sell regularly at the auction with another 600 or 700 coming in at least once or twice a season. Farmers selling through the auction show up on auction day and register their produce. The vegetables must be packaged according to market requirements and packaging materials are available at the auction site in Leola.

During the height of the season, the auction operates six days a week; at the beginning and end of the season, sales are usually limited to two or three days a week.

Both Stoltzfus and Robinson attribute the auction's success to the variety it offers. Nearly any vegetable imaginable finds its way onto the dock, permitting buyers to fill their trucks with a host of fresh items. Even if the auction does not have enough of one item to fill a buyer's order, the buyer will not go home empty-handed, Stoltzfus explained.

The auction has arranged for Don Robinson to attend the sale once a week to answer grower's questions about nutrients, grading and packaging, fertilizers and pesticides.

Dutch Valley Growers, the second major market in the county, uses a different marketing system. Co-op members bring their fresh vegetables to a large warehouse outside of Quarryville where co-op employees grade and package the produce. The growers recently moved to this new, larger location to accommodate additional members. Todd estimates the co-op will represent a third more growers this year.

After packaging, the produce is trucked to buyers in Boston, Baltimore, Washington, Ohio, Florida, and New York, Todd explained. Buyers include chain stores, produce brokers and restaurants.

Members pay a per-box charge, which varies with the vegetable variety, for these services, in

addition to a \$200 lifetime membership fee. Producers are paid according to the quality of their vegetables.

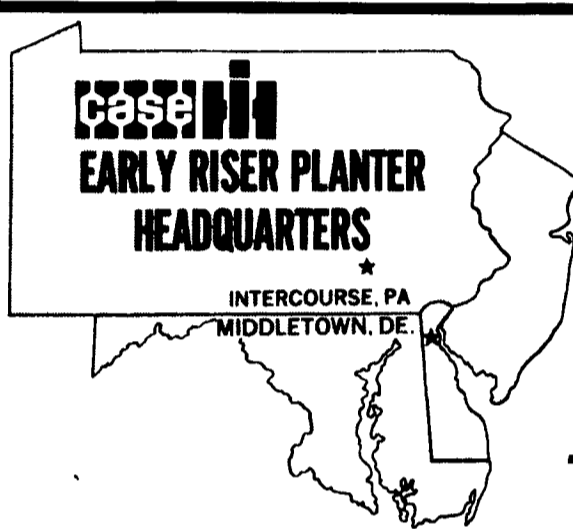
"Here we pretty much have it sold up front," Todd said. "If we have a good product, we're not going to have trouble selling it."

The co-op, representing about 300 grower-members, sells six days a week starting with the earliest vegetables. The co-op also offers a consultant who will work with farmers to solve disease and fertilizer problems.

The third marketing option currently available is the roadside stand. With the amount of traffic through the county, Irwin noted, many roadside stands prosper.

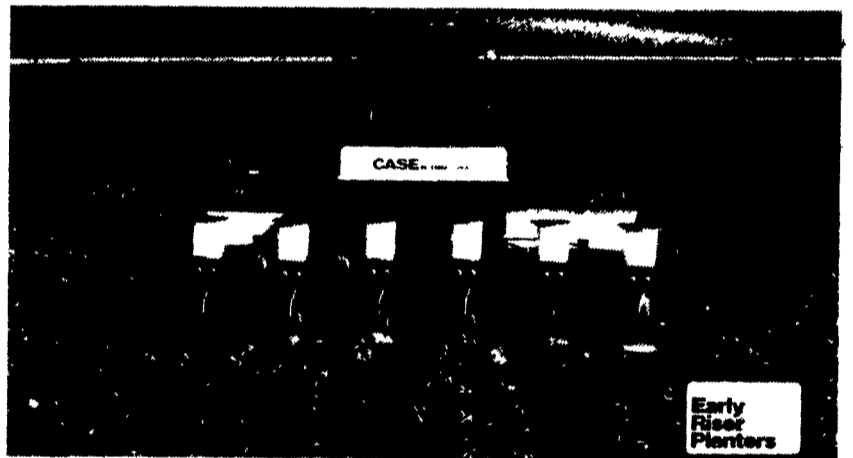
In fact, the county's entire fledgling vegetable industry seems to be prospering and the future looks bright as well.

"The future for vegetables looks good," Robinson says, "if you can produce quality and get it out of the area."

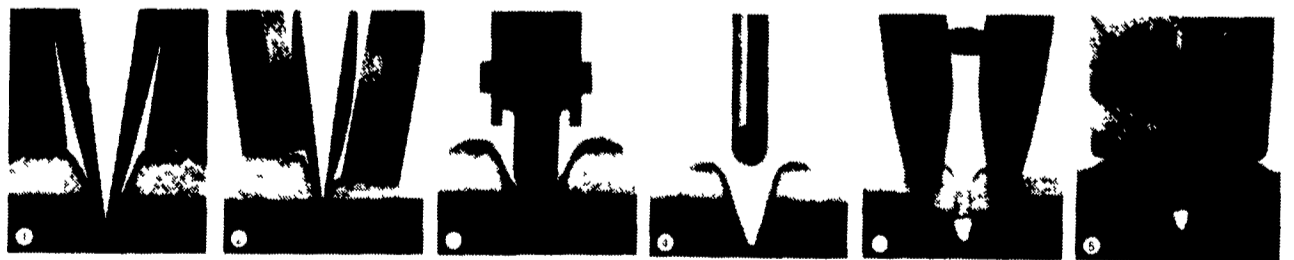


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