

Salesmanship Carries Groff Tomato Farm To Success

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— First and foremost, truck farmers have to be salesmen.

Just ask Steve Groff who, with his father Elias, helps convert about 13½ acres of their joint 200-acre farm into season-long tomato production.

In the old days, Elias went out twice a week to seek customer contacts to sell about 20 acres of a fresh market product. In the mid-season last year, it was close to three times a day.

But that's what a truck farmer has to do to survive in a market that remains competitive and which is more heavily relying on regular customer contact to sell fresh market vegetables.

Market directly

What makes the Groff farm unique is that it is able not only to survive, but to thrive because of its diversity. More importantly, during the past two decades, the Groffs have built up a steady stream of customers. They market directly to some of the large supermarkets and restaurants in Lancaster County.

"What we have done over the last 15 years or so is develop a clientele of about 40-50 different stores and restaurants throughout Lancaster," said Steve Groff. "What we're trying to do is sell direct as much as possible."

"My dad is a salesman," said Groff. "He takes the tomatoes to town, wherever the order is called for, and if they're not sold, he'll go around until he sells them all. He's a very good salesman."

In all, the Groffs raise about 13½ acres of tomatoes. Ten acres are devoted to processing tomatoes, most of which are sold to a cannery in Darlington, Md. The remaining 3½ acres are sold fresh market to such long-term customers as Willow Valley restaurant and market, Bird-In-Hand Family Restaurant, and some of the Weis markets. (Since Weis is an independent grocer, Elias Groff sells to individual produce managers.) The remainder are sold at Leola Produce Auction.

The Groffs take great care throughout the season to make sure they have a steady supply of the best tomatoes, their only vegetable crop. Tomatoes and selling alfalfa to individual markets form the

"bread and butter" of their farming operation.

Plowed in fall

Steve Groff said that, in a normal cycle, the ground is plowed in the fall and chicken manure is incorporated.

In the spring, the fields are readied. Preemergent herbicides are incorporated (usually Treflan and Sencor).

Varieties planted include, for the processing tomatoes, Peel-mech 9208 and Ohio OH 8245. For fresh market tomatoes, the Groffs use Pilgrim (a 67-day early variety) and Mountain Pride (mid- to late-season).

They use a two-row Holland transplanter and incorporate a 9-18-9 liquid starter fertilizer with the plants. One acre uses a special rotary planter that inserts the plants through a plastic mulch. That same acre then is covered with row cover, planted April 19 this year. The remaining acres will be planted on a "staggered" basis.

The row cover proved successful in years past, according to Groff, because it protects the plants from frost (a light frost occurred at the farm soon after the row cover was installed), acts as a greenhouse to promote quick development of the fruit, and protects the plants from cold, damaging winds. The cover is removed about May 20, or earlier if hot weather arrives.

Cages are inserted with the row-covered and mulched tomato plants. Groff uses about 2,500 cages, and the remaining tomatoes (another 2,500) are staked.

The tomatoes that aren't mulched are cultivated twice. Between-row cultivation takes place in June and July. The plants are sidedressed at the same time. Groff uses a granular fertilizer at sidedressing. In the past, he has used urea, but this year he'll use calcium nitrate.

"I don't do a lot of fertilizing right away because our ground's pretty high in nutrients because of the manure," he said.

Harvest date is projected at July 4 for the early fresh market. The processing tomatoes are picked about August 15.

Market dried up

In the past, the Groffs raised "green tomatoes" for transportation to New York and Boston. But



The Groffs use a two-row Holland transplanter and incorporate a 9-18-9 liquid starter fertilizer with the plants. At left, Elias and, seated, son Steve Groff.

the market dried up in the 1980s because of the inability to provide labor on a continuous basis.

Because the Groffs still rely on hand-picking because of their small acreage, they rely on seasonal workers which arrive from Puerto Rico in mid-July. The man who helps coordinate the five seasonal workers is Demetrio Resto, whom Steve's father has known for more than 35 years.

"It's different than a migrant situation because we know these people," said Steve. "We've visited in Puerto Rico. I've gone into their homes. I've been down there twice and my dad's been there six times in years past."

The harvest continues through August and September and concludes with the first frost the beginning of October.

Close contacts

The Groffs maintain close contacts with their customers throughout Lancaster County. "We have some faithful customers," said Steve.



A great deal of success at the Groff farm comes from the hired labor, which includes Mark Stauffer, a part-time worker.

Groff said that, in the mid-season, when prices are low, it is often difficult to obtain more than \$2.50 a box for tomatoes. But they

prefer to sell them at that price rather than seeing them rot, according to Groff.

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Steve Groff, together with his father Elias, helps convert about 13½ acres of their joint 200-acre farm into season-long tomato production. Groff lives on the tomato farm near Holtwood with wife, Cheri and daughter Dana, 13 months. Photo by Andy Andrews.



The row cover proved successful for tomatoes in years past, according to Steve Groff, because it protects the plants from frost (a light frost occurred at the farm soon after the row cover was installed). He's pictured here with 13-month old daughter Dana.