

**Timothy Elkner, Penn State Cooperative Extension, Lancaster County**

Last month I talked about ways you could consider marketing your vegetable and fruit crops. This month I'd like to continue in the area of crop sales by discussing produce quality. I know that we can produce top quality fruits and vegetables here in the county but unfortunately I don't always see top quality at the point of sale.

More than ever before you need to be marketing only the highest quality produce in order to get the highest prices for your

fruits and vegetables. I expect that this year we may have a very tight market due to more producers. With milk prices still fluctuating and tobacco prices off, many people may look to fruits and vegetables as alternate crops to replace income from those areas. In addition, I'm always receiving calls from "gentlemen" farmers, or people with small farms who are looking for ways to make money from their land.

These part-time farmers are usually considering growing some type of vegetable, most frequently sweet corn or pumpkins. All of these producers mean that you are

going to have to distinguish your produce from everyone else's. But how?

The two options you have are to grow something that few, if any other people are producing locally or to consistently sell only the highest quality produce. The first option is probably going to require more effort because you may have to develop the market for that new type of fruit or vegetable.

If you have the time and desire to do this then you may be able to develop a successful niche market for the new crop and enjoy the benefits of reduced competition. However, I expect that the majority of growers are going to be more successful by improving the quality of the produce they market.

There are many factors that control the quality of a fruit or vegetable when it is sold. Stress from weather conditions, insects, and diseases as well as cultural practices influence quality before you even enter the field to harvest. While most weather conditions are beyond our control, drought stress can be relieved by using irrigation.

All fresh market vegetable producers should have an irrigation

system in order to produce a top quality crop. The main way to control excess moisture is to select the best fields for fruit and vegetable production and to put crops that tolerate more water such as corn on your low areas. Damage from diseases and insects is controlled by applying labeled compounds when needed. Be sure to closely monitor your crop so that you are not applying the materials too early or too late.

Cultural practices include selecting a variety adapted to your marketing method and proper fertility management. Variety selection is very important because you do not want to be selling processing vegetables in a fresh market.

Fresh market varieties will usually be softer and store for shorter periods of time but the eating quality will be higher. Fertility management will also influence quality and storability of produce. Excess nitrogen will reduce yields, quality, and storability.

Deficiencies of any other nutrient will also result in decreased yields and quality. Use regular soil tests to monitor soil nutrient levels and carefully monitor nitrogen applications during the growing season.

Many growers do a good job with the field portion of crop production but then destroy some of that quality during harvest and handling. Always start by harvesting the crop, whether fruit or vegetable, at the best maturity for your intended market. If your produce will be consumed shortly after harvest, why harvest it early?

Let the crop stay in the field until it reaches peak eating quality and then harvest. In that way your fruit will be sweeter and your vegetables will taste better as well. If your crop will be shipped, leaving it in the field until it is very mature will result in over-mature produce at the point of sale.

For shipping produce, you need to harvest the crop before you would for immediate consumption and thus some potential quality is lost. However, this produce has to be able to stand-up to the rigors of transport and still be in good condition when it reaches the consumer.

But why do so many growers harvest fruit that will be consumed rapidly and transported very short distances like it will stored for long periods of time? I've seen lots of "green" produce on the market, especially fruit.

## Ridge Administration Awards Grants For Youth

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — On behalf of Gov. Tom Ridge, Agriculture Secretary Samuel E. Hayes Jr. announced that 24 youth organizations have been selected to receive a total of \$57,551 through the Agricultural and Rural Youth Organization Grant Program.

"Gov. Ridge and I are pleased to present these grants which support our agricultural youth and help to ensure that Pennsylvania's strong agricultural tradition is continued for generations to come," Hayes said. "The Agricultural and Rural Youth Grant Board chose the winning projects from 64 submitted applications based on how each would impact the greatest number of youth and best utilize existing or volunteer resources."

The program, started in 1991, allows agriculture youth organizations to apply for direct grants up to \$2,500 to fund educational projects, programs and seminars. This year's grants will fund programs ranging from 4-H camps and educational trips, to a county food-safety program.

Grant recipients were selected by a board comprised of representatives from the departments of Agriculture and Education; the Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association; 4-H; FFA; vocational agriculture teachers; Penn State Cooperative Extension; Pennsylvania State Grange; Pennsylvania Council of Cooperatives Representatives; and members of the state General Assembly.

Following are recipients of this year's grants, listed by county:

- Beaver: Blackhawk FFA, Beaver Falls, \$2,213 to provide equipment for the production of redworms to process organic waste.
- Berks: Kutztown High School FFA, Kutztown, \$2,495 to provide an environmental learning lab related to wildlife habitat, water quality and soil conservation for students in elementary, junior and senior high schools.
- Bucks: Warminster 4-H Club, Doylestown, \$2,500 to provide a field, barn and pasture for a gardening and livestock program for suburban youth.
- Cambria: Pennsylvania Council of Cooperatives (PCC), Patton, \$2,500 to provide for PCC's 1998 four-day summer youth institute at Shippensburg University.
- Centre: State College Little Lions FFA, State College, \$2,250 to provide a mobile resource center for food and fiber education along with pilot Ag Science Academics one-day camps.
- Columbia: Columbia-Montour A.V.T.S., Bloomsburg, \$2,500 to provide a "Horticulture, a Growing Experience" program for third and fourth graders.
- Cumberland: 4-H Development Fund, Carlisle, \$2,500 to provide a three-day Agricultural Science Camp; and Shippensburg High School FFA, \$2,500 to provide a workshop/instruction program to properly train individuals to enter and excel in the commercial and dairy farm business.
- Delaware: 4-H, Springfield, \$2,500 to provide an Ag in the Classroom project.
- Franklin: 4-H Development Fund Committee, Chambersburg, \$2,500 to develop an Ag Learning Center.

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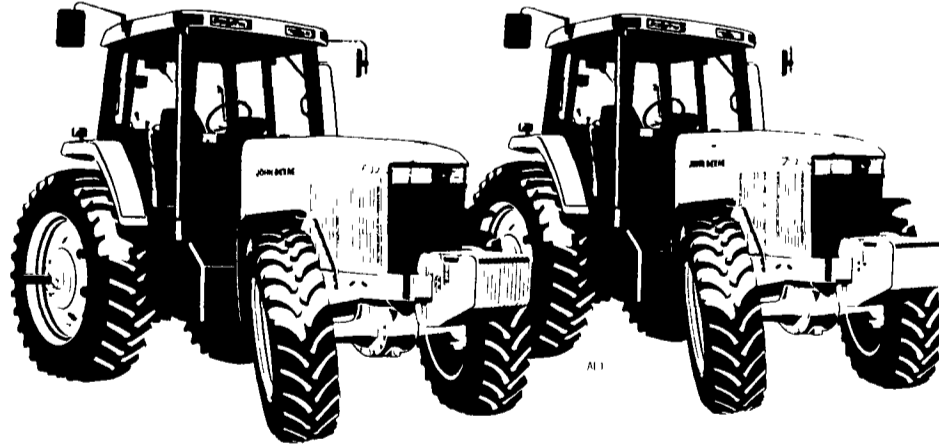
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