



Researchers study onion's health benefits

The Texas onion industry voices excitement that researchers at Texas A&M University are constantly looking into developing a better-tasting onion.

It is Texas A&M, after all, that first developed the Texas 1015, which provided the Lone Star State with an entry into the sweet onion business.

However, industry leaders note that there is other, perhaps more important, work going on in the university's onion labs.

"A lot of emphasis is being put on developing onions that both combat and prevent disease," said John McClung, manager of the Mission-based South Texas Onion Committee.

Bhimu Patil, director of the Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center at Texas A&M, said researchers are spending a lot of time examining the disease-fighting properties of onions.

"We aren't specifically breeding anything now, but we are interested in developing a mild onion with nutritional benefits," Patil said. "We're trying to increase compound levels."

The center has a specialist, Kevin Crosby, who is taking a lead role in studying onions' phytochemical compounds and the role they can play in fighting maladies as disparate as colon cancer and osteoporosis, Patil said.

"Eventually, he will be doing some breeding work in that area," Patil said.

"We're constantly working on that area, checking on phytochemical levels, feeding onions to rats to see how it helps fight osteoporosis. We're expecting some benefits in that study."

Studies in onions' role in preventing colon cancer have some promise, as well, Patil said.

One lesson learned so far is that high-pungency onions carry more nutritional benefits, Patil added.

"We'r trying to make sure whatever vegetable we develop, it should be tasty, flavorful and healthy," he said. "If it's healthy but bitter, nobody tries it and we waste our time."

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