Texas Onions

Cool weather delays start of Texas deal, new Vidalia ship date could extend season

By Chip Carter

The Texas onion deal will be a little late out of the gate this season but growers will get some help extending that season with a new later start date for Vidalia onion growers.

A cold winter by Texas standards — averaging about 10 degrees cooler than normal — will mean the Texas deal will not begin until about mid-March after harvest a week earlier. Mexico has also been behind this season due to cooler temperatures.

In late 2010, Texas onion growers appeared to be sitting pretty. They were coming off a year where their crop fetched as much as $4.50 a box — roughly a dollar a pound. Consumer demand had grown steadily for several years.

Any past problems were squarely in the rearview mirror.

Then, as almost always happens, a few growers decided if some was good, more was better. Overplanting was rampant, production boomed. The predictable result of too much product on the market was a drop in pricing. Two years of struggle followed.

In 2013, growers cut back acreage by 40 percent. Most managed to work out water rights in drought-plagued Texas. The result was a return to solid markets and solid profitability.

Texas growers learned from the struggles of 2011-12, put that knowledge into play in 2013 and will follow the same template for 2014.

They may actually get a boost from an unlikely (and in some cases unwilling) ally as well — Vidalia onion growers. Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary Black earlier this year established a prohibition against early shipping of Vidalia onions. Though there is a court challenge under way, as it stands now, no Vidalia onions can be packed.

While the state grows red, white and yellow onions, Texas is best-known as the birthplace of the 1015 sweet onion, the template for the modern industry.

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TAMU research seeks to improve sweet onion production worldwide

By Chip Carter

In 1898, a packet of Bermuda onion seeds was planted near Cotulla, TX. In spring of 1899, the resulting crop was shipped to Milwaukee, WI, and the mild, sweet onions were an instant hit. The next year a larger crop was planted and an industry was born.

Onions caught on quickly in the hot, dry climate. By 1904, 500 acres of Bermuda onions were planted in south Texas. In 1907, 1,001 train carloads of onions were shipped out of state. The next year, production doubled. In 1917 that figure leapt to 6,735 loads and by 1920 Texas had virtually put Bermuda out of the onion business.

Bermuda seeds had a tendency to bolt or split. The impact on production led to the first onion-breeding program in the state at the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station in Winter Garden in 1933. That same year, working in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, researchers from Texas A&M University bred the Texas Grano 502, considered the mother of all sweet onions produced around the world today.

By 1940 the new onions were entering commercial production, and in 1944 TAMU released the 502 for sale around the world.

Four decades later, another TAMU researcher, Leonard Pike, now retired, would revolutionize the industry.

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Prices should be strong," said Bret Erickson, president of the Texas International Produce Association. "We still need moisture. But quality looks to be excellent and we will have a good supply of sweet onions out of Texas." In 2013 "there was one week in there you could actually call winter and that was it, the first week of January," said Don Ed Holmes of The Onion House in Weslaco. This year the cool-er weather provided a reverse of 2013. And while the crop is late, Holmes was quick to note that onions are dormant during much of the production cycle, getting most of their growth in the month before harvest, and thus virtually impervious to cooler weather.

TAMU research seeks to continually improve sweet onion production worldwide

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When it comes to vegetables in Texas, onions are atop the heap. The state moves between $75 million and $100 million worth of onions annually. The majority of those are sweet Grimes onions, but there are plenty of reds and white as well. The overall impact on the Texas economy is about $350 million each year.

Much of that success can be directly attributed to the development of the Texas 105 variety. Pikel's contributions to the industry were legendary, but he has typically downplayed his achievements over the years. His wife, Roye A. Pikel, told The Produce News, "When I surprised Leonard with a personalized Texas license plate with '105' on it, his first reaction was, 'I can't drive around with that on my truck!' I explained part of the cost went to scholarships at TAMU and he finally relented. Later, he was very proud of it and opened the door for him to 'talk onions.' As his wife, I can tell you he never has accepted that he is a celebrity. He simply enjoyed his work more than anyone I have ever known, had a great energy and passion for it and, as he says, 'I loved helping people.'" Ihimu Patil is one of the people Pikel helped. A former student of Pikel, today Patil is an esteemed professor and director of The Vegetable Improvement Center at TAMU — the same position his mentor held.

"I was a student of Dr. Pikel when he was breeding onions. My job is to take the next step and it's not easy to fill his shoes," Patil said. "We are going beyond what they used to do."

"The varieties developed at A&M after Dr. Pikel are milder and sweeter still. The 105 was a great contribution to the Texas onion industry at that time and even now. If he didn't develop the 1015 the industry wouldn't be here now. Recently a study was done on how it affected the economy of Texas. Over 10 years it contributed about $350 million and still the economic impact of the 1015 on the Texas economy is tremendous."