

Growers Needed For Kale, Other Veggie Crops

Justin Trussoni of De Soto, Wis., started growing squash for Organic Valley – the big organic co-op based in Wisconsin – when he was 19. Three years ago he added kale – a popular “health food” crop for consumers.

“It’s the plant that keeps on giving,” he says. “You harvest the bottom leaves and it grows new leaves at the top of the plant.” As long as it receives water through irrigation or rain, kale plants produce well into the fall and even after frost, resembling miniature palm trees with new leaves growing on top of husky stalks.

Kale thrives in cooler climates so it’s ideal for growers who live near Organic Valley’s headquarters in La Farge, Wis., adds Jeff Bartovics, produce pool manager for the company. As soon as kale is picked – in bunches packed 24 to a case – it’s hydro cooled and refrigerated to keep it fresh as it’s distributed to wholesale markets across the country.

“Within the last 3 to 5 years, demand for Kale has doubled every year,” Bartovics says. Organic Valley sells around \$6 million worth of vegetables annually including cabbage, winter squash, cucumbers and leafy greens. Last season, green curly kale, the most popular variety, netted more than

\$430,000 in the Midwest, with producers earning about \$12.50/case.

Kale is a popular crop with many of the Wisconsin area growers.

“It’s good for crop rotation (every 3 to 5 years) and you get good cash flow through the summer,” Trussoni says. While it’s intense labor because it needs to be hand-picked weekly, it has low input and seed costs and produces a high dollar per acre crop.

Trussoni fertilizes in the fall and foliar feeds fish emulsion through the growing season. Providing plenty of nutrients to maintain healthy plants is one of the best defenses against disease, he says. Growing in soil with a 6 to 6 1/2 pH along with rotation helps prevent insects that eat holes in young plants or cause more serious plant problems.

The 30-year-old farmer plants 6 to 8-week-old kale transplants spaced 18 in. apart in rows that are 3 ft. apart to allow leaves to grow bigger and make it easier to harvest. He cultivates early in the season to keep ahead of the weeds, but notes that some growers grow kale in black plastic. Since he grows organically he doesn’t use herbicides, so once the plants are established he doesn’t worry about weeds.

Trussoni expects kale to continue to be a



Photo courtesy David Nevala for Organic Valley

Organic grower Justin Trussoni says kale has become a popular “health food” crop for consumers.

good market and plans to grow 4 acres in 2016.

“I have relatives eating it that I wouldn’t expect,” he says, noting that kale is sweeter when the weather is cooler. After stripping the leaves off the rib, he eats kale several ways – in smoothies, steamed, fried and in soups and casseroles, for example.

“You don’t want to overcook it,” Bartovics adds.

Making kale chips and mixing it in with coleslaw and other recipes are also delicious ways to use kale, Bartovics notes.

For home gardeners, Trussoni suggests just growing a few plants as they will provide kale all season. Surplus leaves can be fed to chickens, pigs and cattle.

For people interested in growing kale to sell to Organic Valley, Bartovics says organic growers must be within about 45 minutes of La Farge, Wis., since kale must be kept cool. However, there are opportunities in other parts of the country to grow cabbage, winter squash and other produce. Information is on the cooperative’s website under Farmer Support.

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Seed “Designed” For The North

Theresa and Dan Podoll’s favorite vegetables are becoming favorites across an ever-wider area. Their Prairie Road Organic Seed varieties include Uncle David’s Dakota Dessert squash, bred by Dan’s brother, and Dakota Winter onion, believed to have been brought from Prussia by Dan’s great grandparents in the late 1800’s. Bred and selected to thrive in North Dakota, they are filling a niche in the seed business.

“A lot of smaller seed companies have been rolled into corporate holdings, resulting in a loss of regional varieties that don’t sell in large enough volume for the large corporations,” says Theresa. “That left a hole for us to find varieties that did well, especially in northern tier states.”

The Podolls previously made the transition from organic gourmet turkeys to contract seed producers. “We were selling turkeys on both the East and West Coasts,” recalls Theresa. “When our processing plant shut down, we were unable to find a replacement and had to reinvent ourselves.”

After raising vegetables for seed under contract, the Podolls offered some of their family favorites to the companies to try. As sales of those varieties grew, they decided to sell the seed themselves.

They added other regional favorites like Homesteader peas, introduced to North Dakota in 1908, and Hidatsa Shield beans, grown by the Hidatsa tribe on the Missouri River in North Dakota. Today the 34 varieties offered are a combination of family and regional heritage varieties, as well as new varieties developed by the Podolls and others.

The varieties are all open-pollinated and organic certified. The seed can be saved and replanted by anyone buying it. However, varieties planted in a garden with other similar varieties can crossbreed. While that can result in an exciting new variety worth keeping, it may not. Not only are Podoll’s seeds bred true, they are evolving and improving.



Theresa and Dan Podoll’s Prairie Road Organic Seed varieties include Sweet Dakota Rose watermelon.

“We are continually selecting the best plants so they can adapt to environmental changes,” says Theresa. “As disease and insect pressures change or ramp up, we are selecting those plants that best handle stresses. We are also saving those most suited to our palate.”

She points to the company’s vine crops that were subjected to 3 days of high wind. She notes that only the strongest plants were able to survive. While 2014 was a poor year for production, it was a great year for selection. Saved seed will be stronger.

“When challenged, Mother Nature selects for the strongest and most fit plants,” says Theresa. “This was a perfect year for other crops with good production. Because we are small and diversified, we can absorb those kinds of shocks and yet gain ground.”

Although the company specializes in varieties selected for North Dakota, they are now selling seed in stores across the Dakotas and Minnesota and expanding into Iowa and Wisconsin. Customers from across the country order from the online store.

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Tony Curtis and his sons operate Tasty Harvest Shrimp, a farm operation that raises, sells and delivers fresh shrimp to individuals, stores and restaurants.

Shrimp Farm Thrives In An Old Barn

Tony Curtis grew up in Massachusetts and regularly enjoyed fresh seafood. So he and his sons were surprised to learn when they visited a shrimp farm in Indiana that farm-raised shrimp could taste just as good. Their taste buds sold them on the idea of building their own operation back in Massachusetts and warming the production tanks’ water with LP gas.

Curtis and his sons are now the proud operators of Tasty Harvest Shrimp, a farm operation that raises, sells and delivers what they believe is the freshest, most delicious shrimp on the market. The Curtis family stakes that claim on the fact that their shrimp are free of sulfites, hormones and antibiotics, ingredients that many other farm-raised seafood might contain. The majority are sold fresh to individuals or to restaurants and stores in Boston and greater Massachusetts.

Curtis was a public school music teacher for 9 years and left that work to become a programmer analyst. Within a few years, he and his sons, Adam and Josh, started the shrimp business. Josh has a minor in Marine Biology and has bred more than 10 different species of saltwater fish. The business raises whiteleg vanname shrimp in 19 saltwater tanks.

The Curtis family says shrimp from Tasty Harvest is better because it isn’t subjected to further processing and flash freezing like most products in a store. Shrimp are produced in tanks where 90,000 gal. of water

are recycled daily to prevent pathogen growth.

Curtis and his sons learned that in order to create a warm aquatic environment they’d need a cost efficient system in a well-insulated building. After looking at several facilities they settled on an old barn that was large, affordable and available. They insulated the walls and ceiling with blown-in fiberglass, then installed a positive air flow system with pre-heated air to reduce humidity, mold and heating costs. Radiant zone heating in the floor keeps tank water at 84 to 86 degrees. That level of warmth is needed because the shrimp they raise are native to the warmer waters of the eastern Pacific near Baja, Calif. Curtis priced different types of fuel and determined that LP, using a 98 percent efficient boiler, would be more cost effective than heating oil.

Another benefit of the Curtis system is that all waste the shrimp produce is consumed by bacteria in the water. They don’t release water into the environment. The farm hopes to ramp up production soon and produce about 300 lbs. of fresh shrimp a week.

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