MEETING THE NEEDS OF WISCONSIN’S FRESH MARKET INDUSTRY

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The fresh market vegetable industry in Wisconsin is large, diverse, and increasing annually. Production and pest management practices range from conventional to certified organic and the crop is marketed in a wide variety of ways. It is currently estimated that there are over 1500 fresh vegetable growers in the state. This significant number of growers contributes to Wisconsin’s ranking of 8th in the nation in the number of direct market farms, and 6th in terms of the value of direct market sales at $21.8 million (1997 USDA Agricultural Census http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/). One significant growth area in fresh market production is organic farms. Wisconsin is a leader nationally in organic acreage with approximately 600 certified organic farms, second only to California. Wisconsin is also a leader in the number of farmers markets with close to 200 markets around the state. Three produce auctions in the state provide growers with a central location to sell their produce wholesale. This has allowed an opportunity for Amish and Mennonite farmers to enter into the fresh vegetable arena now that they have a local marketing opportunity.

Recently the industry was surveyed through several means to learn what their needs were. The first survey was a production and pest management survey conducted with Pete Nowak’s group in Rural Sociology in 2001 (see the following web site for details http://ipcm.wisc.edu/piap/vegsurvey/default.htm). The results of this survey were similar to a pest management survey conducted with the Wisconsin Agricultural Statistic Service in 1996. Despite the survey results in both cases, personal communication with growers indicates practices other than those described by the survey respondents.

A second, informal survey was conducted at the 2003 Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Conference, the Direct Marketing Conference, and the Stateline Fruit and Vegetable Conference. This survey was in the form of a dot poster. An extensive topic list was developed and displayed along with colored dots for the growers to indicate anonymously what their key issues were along with what they desired programming activities to address.

Key issues include
- marketing and business management (& recordkeeping)
- weed management
- variety trials
- season extension with ZIP houses, hoop houses and greenhouses
- small-scale, specialized equipment
- customer relations

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• troubleshooting and diagnosis
• enterprise budgets

In 2003, a new position was created in the Department of Horticulture, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison. It is an outreach position designed solely to work with the fresh market vegetable growers in the state providing education and outreach opportunities. A group of growers, researchers, and educators met in spring 2003 to discuss the key issues and provide guidance and program direction. From this meeting a mission statement and list of objectives was developed.

Mission:
The fresh market vegetable team and its partners will provide research-based information to improve the economic stability and environmental soundness of the fresh market vegetable industry of Wisconsin.

Objectives:
• Assist fresh market growers acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to produce a crop with minimal negative impact on the environment.
• Assist growers to develop the necessary business management skills to run a profitable business.
• Enable growers to develop the skills necessary to market their product profitably.
• Enhance consumer demand for Wisconsin fresh market vegetables.
• Increase legislative and public awareness to the importance of the fresh market industry in Wisconsin and programming at the University of Wisconsin.
• Create statewide, information-sharing grower gatherings.
• Identify research needs in Wisconsin.
• Create an advisory committee of growers to increase grower involvement in program planning.

Programming is underway to address these objectives. Educational programs covering several of the key issues have been planned or conducted already.
• Publications
  • Growing Onions, Garlic, Leeks and Other Alliums in Wisconsin
  • Growing Salad Greens in Wisconsin
  • Becoming a Certified Organic Fresh Market Grower
  • Integrated Pest Management: An Overview for Market Growers
  • Bean Leaf Beetle
  • Consumer Vegetable Fact Sheet Series
  • Vegetable Disease Fact Sheets – 24 planned

• Pest Management Strategic Plans
  • Potato
  • Edible Legumes
  • Cabbage
  • Sweet Corn
• Conferences/Seminars/Field Days
  o Fresh Market Vegetable Grower Association Spring & Fall Field Days
  o Business Basics Seminar
  o Hmong Pest Management Workshop in Green Bay
  o Hmong Marketing Workshop in Manitowoc
  o Hmong Pest Management Workshop in Milwaukee
  o Hmong Marketing Workshop in Milwaukee
  o Amish/Produce Auction Seller Training Seminars (3)
  o Farmers Market Manager Workshop
  o Farmers Market Vendor Workshop for Southeast Wisconsin Growers
  o Production & Pest Management Workshop in Green Bay

• Demonstrations
  o Garlic Variety Trial at West Madison Research Station

Outreach to address specific concerns by unique cultures such as the Hmong and Amish has been initiated and programming to address their specific needs will occur in 2004. One key development has been the positioning of the fresh market vegetable program coordinator as the contact person and central clearinghouse for all fresh market vegetable activities in the state. After so many years of relative uninvolvment by the University of Wisconsin, the fresh market vegetable growers are now receiving the support they deserve.