

Marketing, a Window to Success

On an April day in the Imperial Valley of California, a farm laborer slices through stalks of broccoli and quickly places them in a well-lined box that will take them to supermarkets all over the country.

On the same day, a South Carolina farmer—who follows generations of farmers who produced only tobacco and row crops—walks his fields and tries to slice through a myriad of questions: “What vegetables should I plant, and when? How will I get the labor? Will the weather hold? How can I keep that lettuce cool? Is that buyer in New Jersey going to take it? And finally, will I hit that market window of opportunity following production in California, Arizona, Texas, Florida, and Georgia but just before farmers in North Carolina are getting their crops in for shipping?”



Jim Rushing (center), Clemson University Extension specialist, discusses what, when, and how to plant for the best marketing window with vegetable producers in South Carolina. Coordinating these types of variables is a step toward getting an optimum price in the marketplace.

The Move to Vegetables

Because of the continued emphasis on the issue of smoking and health, many traditional South Carolina tobacco producers are taking steps to grow alternate crops, such as ready-to-market vegetables. Their steps are hesitant and more than a bit cautious, however, because they have seen the vagaries of the marketplace for such commodities. They have help, though, from Clemson

by Jerry Dyer, Clemson University Area News Editor, Pee Dee Research and Education Center, Florence, SC

University Extension agents, such as Bill Witherspoon, Powell Smith, and Tony Melton.

“Vegetable production is not really new to us,” explains Bill Witherspoon, director of Extension in Horry County, “but when it seemed that many farmers were going to go at it like grandpa did, we had to work with them in a hurry. Even so, we can’t really push too fast on something like this. It takes time. These people have their ideas about things just like we do. Some of them are valid.

Some are based on the old days when the railroad came through, bought their green beans off wagons pulled by mules, and the train steamed on up the tracks.”

The Window

According to Witherspoon, “It’s a different world now. It’s got a catch called a market window.” For a particular vegetable crop, the market window is the period between the end of shipments from farther south and the

beginning of shipments from farther north. Farmers must harvest their vegetables and ship them to markets when the window is open. "They've got to have a labor force; proper harvesting, cleaning, cooling, and storage; and, most important, a viable market at the right time for their efforts. The word 'effort' doesn't really tell the story. They have to work day and night."

Jim Rushing is a Clemson Extension Service scientist who specializes in postproduction and packaging. He is based at Clemson's Coastal Research and Education Center near Charleston. According to Rushing, once growers make a firm commitment, they stand a good chance of making a profit.

"We have growers who bring in good crops, and several who make an investment in packaging coleslaw, shredded carrots, radishes, and some specialty oriental vegetables for supermarkets and restaurants," says Rushing. "They have clean, cold operations, good transportation, and a firm labor force for the field as well as for processing. If you don't have that multifaceted combination, you won't turn a dollar."

In several South Carolina counties, Extension Service agents have worked closely with elected officials for funding to create cooperatives and market associations. These organizations follow guidelines under which produce is cleaned, graded, packed, and shipped to market on time as ordered.

Planning for Profit

Extension Service agents continue to improve crop varieties, as well as production and harvest practices, and to assist in budget planning. Planning is the key to profiting from market windows.

"We just flat out had to tell some farmers who had financial problems that they'd be in worse difficulties if they thought vegetables were some sort of quick fix," Witherspoon adds. "It takes a healthy investment in capital and personal commitment.

"Many just don't understand the aspect of the market window and how vital it is. We've got good soils and good farmers who'll work their fingers off, but if they grow cabbage or lettuce, onions, and potatoes when the market is flooded from other States, then they've just lost a bundle of money that many may not have even had in the first place."

Powell Smith, Clemson Extension Service area agent in Horry, Georgetown, and Marion Counties, is troubled that the market window concept may not be understood by many growers.

"We monitor the markets nationwide and try to advise our farmers when it would be best to plant certain varieties of cabbage, for instance, to hit it right in Canada, New York City, Philadelphia, or Newark," he says. "Then we still see some folks going right along in a hit or miss manner."

"Many are receptive, though, and they turn out for our demonstrations and seminars. After each season shows them a profit, we pick up more and more credibility. That's the way it is in the world of the Extension Service trying to help our farmers. We've got to prove ourselves most every day."

Tony Melton, Smith's counterpart in Darlington and Florence Counties, agrees: "It's show time just about every day. We're excited about some grants which appear to be coming our way to get about 20 producers into the Pee Dee Packers and Produce Cooperative based at a State farmers' market. The growers buy in for \$500 down and another \$500 in a few months, so they are paying their part, too. We're working on well-timed market orders for bell peppers, cucumbers, squash, eggplants, and sweet potatoes."

"We have to be very, very careful," he adds, "because many of these crops have only a 2- to 3-week market window open between Georgia and North Carolina.

"We've met with the brokers up in the Northeast. They like our produce. They want our vegetables. But they all say the same thing: 'Hit that window.'"