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East Kentucky sweet potato harvest promising

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"Sweet potatoes are a good fit for this area because you can do it on a small acreage and if you're doing direct marketing, it's a reasonably profitable crop with a fairly low capital investment."

Two years ago on a visit to Canada, Sarah Fannin saw something she was sure would be a good fit for east Kentucky agriculture ♦ sweet potatoes.

The tuber has long been a cultural favorite in east Kentucky, with school children even eating the root raw as an after school snack. Turns out, her hunch was right.

Since Fannin is the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension agent for agriculture and natural resources in Morgan County, she went to work to try and obtain funding and support to try out sweet potatoes as a potential alternative to tobacco production in Morgan and surrounding Appalachian counties. Fortunately the Southern Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program agreed to provide grant funding for the sweet potato project.

"The funding took away some of the riskiness of a new crop. We really feel like sweet potatoes will do well in our area," Fannin said. "There's a cultural tie in with sorghum and we think we can develop a niche market."

Fannin gathered 15 interested growers and formed the East Kentucky Sweet Potato Growers Association. Those 15 producers planted 12 acres this year, which Fannin said may not seem like a lot on the surface.

"One to two acres doesn't seem like a lot, but when we are looking at yields of 450 to 500 bushels per acre, that's quite a bit," she said.

Tim Coolong is working with Fannin on the two-year project. As a horticulture specialist with the UK College of Agriculture, he has provided expertise to growers as they have sown and harvested the sweet potato crop.

"Sweet potatoes are a good fit for this area because you can do it on a small acreage and if you're doing direct marketing, it's a reasonably profitable crop with a fairly low capital investment," Coolong said. "It's not a high input crop; the planting is fairly easy with a tobacco setter. You can set sweet potato slips about as fast as you can set tobacco."

Coolong said the crop is easy to manage while it's growing because there are only a few insect pests that bother it.

Fannin wanted the growers to have an easier time harvesting the crop, which can be quite laborious so she contacted a flip plow manufacturer in North Carolina. They typically manufacture six-row harvesters for sweet potatoes, but Fannin convinced them to customize a plow for single-row harvesting. Morgan County Extension purchased the plow and made it available to the 15 growers in the project so their harvest would be a little easier.

"What it does (the flip plow) is lift the potatoes out of the ground and then lays them on the side of the row," Coolong said. "A crew has to follow behind and remove the potatoes from the pile. There's still a fair amount of labor involved, but the plow cuts it down considerably. With a decent size crew, you could harvest an acre in a day."

On a cool October day, Monica Hall was helping harvest an acre of sweet potatoes on the farm she operates with her husband Keith. It was their first year growing the crop on the farm where they also raise milk goats, mules and horses and grow corn and hay. The Halls used to grow tobacco in Maryland, but like most tobacco growers, they're interested in profitable alternatives.

"It's pretty cost effective because we are using equipment we already have and the soil is very good here, so we don't have to use a lot of pesticides or extra fertilizer," she said.

Hall and other growers will sell their harvest at farmers' markets and roadside farm stands this year, in fact, most of the crop is already spoken for. At an average price of \$20 per bushel, the first year of production is ending on a positive note.

"Seeing the harvest now and seeing that it's possible to grow a quality crop like this in our region is great," Fannin said. "Now that we know we can grow it, we're going to work on fine tuning our marketing initiatives."

Fannin said the growers association hopes to eventually sell their sweet potatoes to schools and restaurants and see the farm to table model come to life in a way that benefits everyone in east Kentucky.

Morgan County Cooperative Extension Agent for Family and Consumer Sciences Nellie Buchannan believes sweet potatoes are a natural, healthy fit for the region.

"We've grown up on sweet potatoes; they are a part of our culture," she said. "They are very healthy with a lower carb content and higher fiber content than Irish potatoes. Some of the younger generations have gotten away from sweet potatoes, but we are working to show them sweet potatoes are good for much more than that holiday casserole"

Buchannan said sweet potatoes are a great alternative to a baked Irish potato as a side dish and also great in baked goods such as sweet potato biscuits and pie.

"Basically any dish that calls for pumpkin, you can use sweet potatoes in equal amounts," Buchannan said.

The Morgan County 4-Hers have introduced sweet potatoes to local fourth and fifth graders by making them sweet potato pancakes.

"The younger folks are catching on, " Buchannan said. "They like the versatility and I've seen their surprise, Sweet potatoes are just very good for Morgan County and for Kentucky."

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