

Onions provide farm with steady income

By LACEY JARRELL
For the Capital Press

Farms producing crops in uncertain markets can help stabilize their income by contracting with food processing companies, according to Dan Chin, owner of Chin Farms in Klamath Falls, Ore.

"I'd rather do potatoes, but onions give us diversification that keeps us in business," he said.

Chin, who also owns Wong Potatoes, said 20 years ago his family farm decided to try its hand at onions and contracted with two food processing corporations that produce dehydrated onions for flakes and powder.

Chin said that his grandfather started farming potatoes in the Klamath Basin in the 1930s. He said the family has always grown fresh-market potatoes — including 16 varieties of red, yellow, russet, purple, white and fingerling — but the market has a lot of ups and downs.



Lacey Jarrell/For the Capital Press
Dan Chin, of Chin Farms in Klamath Falls, Ore., has steadied his farm's income by cultivating hundreds of tiny black onion seeds into onions that are processed into flakes and powder.

"Probably more downs than ups," Chin said.

He began looking for a contract crop to help level that out. Chin said the onions provide more stability

because they are pre-contracted for volume and price.

Now, onions make up 15 percent of his operation's income.

Chin said the varieties he grows are developed by the food processing companies he contracts with, but they are typically small onions with big flavor.

"It's really hot, but when you cook it, it takes the hotness off," Chin said.

The varieties also produce a lot of solids, meaning more of the flesh transforms into flakes.

Chin plants onions in 36-inch beds, four lines per bed. The tiny purple-and-black onion seeds — about the size of peppercorns — are pneumatically deposited one-half inch in the ground about 2 inches apart, he explained.

Chin said he is looking to bump up production next year by adding another line, for a total of five. Instead of making two side-by-side beds, he explained, the center tire track will be eliminated to make one wider bed.

Although contracted onions produce a reliable paycheck, they aren't without challenges, according to Chin. He said onions are tougher to grow than many other crops because "you have to babysit them."

"They are really hard to get started because you start from a true seed," he said.

In addition, for onions — a slow-growing crop — weed control is critical during the first half of the six-month season. Onions grow vertically and weeds can easily outcompete them.

Onion maggots pose another challenge — they live on stubble left from the previous year's crop and burrow into the soil to eat onion seeds.

Chin noted that part of having a contracted crop like dehydrated onions means harvest starts when the food processing companies call for onions — sometimes the onions are fully mature, sometimes they aren't.

"We start harvesting

when the company is ready for us," Chin said.

If the onions are coated with soil and dirt clods, he may lose a percentage of the contracted price, but if the crop is clod-free and high quality, he may receive a bonus.

"They are looking for a good quality onion," he said. "It's pretty labor intensive, but it can be a pretty rewarding crop if you get a good yield."



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