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# Idaho

## Alternative fruit crops show promise

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

PARMA, Idaho — Some alternative fruit crops under study at University of Idaho’s Parma experiment station show promising results. “The alternative fruit crop studies are very, very promising,” said researcher Essie Fallahi, who heads UI’s pomology program and is leading the study. “Some of the fruits that we are getting for the first time are fantastic.”

Fallahi has been experimenting with different fruit varieties from around the world that he thinks could grow well in Idaho.

The selection of fruits includes blackberries, quince, pears, table grapes, strawberries, persimmon and nut crops such as walnuts, pecans and almonds.

None of these crops are grown commercially on a significant scale in Idaho, but Fallahi believes some of them can be.

Fallahi said blackberry varieties being studied at Parma “are doing amazingly well. This year we have fantastic (results) among the berries we tested.”

Pears from Iran that are being tested at Parma reached “tremendous” sizes in 2016, the first year they were harvested.

“The size is ... at least a time and a half bigger than ordinary pears,” he said.

Parma researchers are also looking at 17 new varieties of table grapes, which are a fledgling industry in Idaho.

“I think that we will find they will make all the other table grapes (grown in Idaho)



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

University of Idaho researcher Essie Fallahi holds two pears harvested this year at UI's Parma research station. Researchers report promising results for several alternative fruits under study there.

pale in comparison,” Fallahi said. “This is very, very encouraging.”

Strawberry varieties planted for the first time at Parma last year are also performing well, he said.

Fallahi said the station has two years of results for most of the alternative crop varieties but would like four years of results before providing hard recommendations to growers.

“We are two years away from having solid recommendations,” he said. “A lot (more) information is coming.”

The station’s alternative crop work has been supported by Idaho State Department of Agriculture specialty crop grants as well as the southwestern Idaho commercial fruit industry.

Jerry Henggeler, general manager and co-owner of Henggeler Packing Co., said he is particularly interested in the nut and pear varieties studied at the Parma research station.

But his company is also keeping an eye on all the fruits studied there.

“You’re always looking for something that might be your next niche that will fit into your portfolio,” Henggeler said.

He said the work done by fruit researchers is invaluable to Idaho growers because they need to know how certain varieties will perform under Idaho conditions, but can’t afford to do that research on their own.

“The first thing you want to know is, will the crop grow here with our weather, ground conditions and our winters?” Henggeler said. “(Fallahi) and his crew are very, very particular. When we get numbers from them, we’re pretty confident in those numbers.”

Michael Williamson, manager of Williamson Orchards and Vineyards, said niche markets are critical for Idaho’s commercial fruit growers and the Parma fruit trials “are a great way to keep Idaho on the cutting edge of possibilities.”



John O’Connell/Capital Press

Lily Maheras, left, and Lucy Melick measure the growth of oat seed roots. The Holy Spirit Catholic School seventh-graders are helping the USDA Agricultural Research Service in Aberdeen, Idaho, to evaluate oat seeds for their ability to germinate in cold conditions.

## Idaho seventh-graders to feature research at genome conference

By JOHN O’CONNELL  
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — For a few days, Virginia Jones’ seventh-graders will be peers with 3,000 leading genetic scientists and researchers, presenting their findings at the world’s largest agricultural genomics meeting.

The Holy Spirit Catholic School students will be the only children to prepare an abstract and professional poster for display at the Plant & Animal Genome Conference Jan. 14-18 in San Diego.

Their special circumstances are the result of the unique importance of their class project — helping USDA’s Aberdeen Agricultural Research Service evaluate 250 heirloom oat varieties for their ability to germinate in cold conditions.

“They don’t horse around when they’re doing this. There’s no playing or anything,” Jones said. “It’s a whole different thing when they’re actually doing real science versus a cookbook experiment.”

USDA-ARS research geneticist Kathy Klos, the mother of one of the seventh-graders, suggested the project — and arranged for them to present in San Diego, where the conference will waive the standard \$600-per-person admission fee.

Klos hopes to develop new oat varieties capable of germinating earlier in the season, enabling them to out-compete weeds.

The seventh-graders are preparing clear boxes of moistened seeds to place in a refrigerator, recording the germination date of each variety and logging root growth on a spreadsheet.

Klos will show the students how to run computer software to compare their germination data against 4,000 randomly selected locations across the genome — hoping to identify commonalities within seeds that perform well in the cold.

She’ll consider the data when making future oat crosses, a fact that isn’t lost on the students.

## Potandon introduces light-blocking bags

### New design offers longer shelf life for fresh potatoes

By JOHN O’CONNELL  
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS — A fresh potato company has introduced a new bag designed to block light and significantly extend the shelf life of spuds.

The announcement was made at the Produce Marketing Association’s Fresh Summit Oct. 14-16 in Orlando, Fla.

Idaho Falls-based Potandon Produce LLC, the largest seller of fresh potatoes, has been test marketing its new Light-Blocker Half-N-Half bags with its Klondike Gold dust line for three months.

The company plans to offer the bags as an option to retailers for about a dozen top-selling products under the Green Giant brand, said Ralph Schwartz, vice president of sales and export sales.

“The PMA is a wonderful forum because the entire industry is there from an audience standpoint, and the audience representation is really people who are decision-makers,” Schwartz said.

The bags block 99.5 percent of ultraviolet and visible light, which should virtually eliminate potato greening in retail displays and home pantries, Schwartz said.

He also said the bags should reduce sprouting and dehydration.

The bags, which can be manufactured for a couple of

pennies each more than traditional bags, have an opaque layer beneath the front decals and a clear back to allow consumers to view the product.

“The whole crux of this project was really to help retailers have a better experience,” Schwartz said. “We already have one really large retailer who has tried it.”

Schwartz said the manufacturer says the bags extend shelf life by a couple of weeks. His internal testing has found a significant improvement in the appearance of spuds after an extended period.

Michigan State University’s School of Packaging developed the technology, and Potandon’s bag supplier, Volm Bag Co., holds the trademark.



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