

Sweet potatoes run in grower's family

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

Matt Alvernaz knows sweet potatoes, which he calls "nature's superfood."

"I am a fourth-generation sweet potato farmer," he said. "My grandfather was 'Sweet Potato Joe Alvernaz,' one of the pioneers in the California sweet potato industry." Growing up, Alvernaz spent his summer days weeding sweet potato fields on the farm his parents and grandpar-

ents owned near Livingston, a town in Merced County.

"Then the weekends I would spend working on my grandparents' dairy," he said.

In high school he was involved in FFA, showing dairy cattle. Alvernaz judged dairy at Modesto Junior College and at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., where he received a bachelor of science degree.

He is now the farm manager of his parents' sweet potato operation in addition to farming his own 300 acres. His wife, Sarah, is the sales and general manager of a grower-owned company, the California Sweet Potato Growers shipper-packer.

The company packs and ships 300,000 cartons of sweet potatoes and yams each year.

Sweet potatoes are difficult and expensive to raise. They require sandy soil and warm, dry weather and clean water, he said. "They are very labor-intensive and require a large capital investment year after year."

Each acre demands between 100 and 120 man-hours, and that does not include pack-



Courtesy of Jill Hough

Matt Alvernaz, a sweet potato grower in Merced County, Calif., says about 22,000 acres are planted to sweet potatoes in the state each year.

ing labor, he said.

Each year, about 20,000 to 22,000 acres are planted to sweet potatoes in California. Ninety-five percent are grown in Merced and Stanislaus counties.

Several varieties of sweet potatoes are available but four main color categories are grown in California: Jewel (orange skin and flesh), Red (red skin and orange flesh), Sweets (yellow skin and flesh) and

Oriental (purple skin and white flesh).

The main pest concerns are nematodes, army worms, wire worms, rodents, gophers and squirrels, he said.

Alvernaz said several looming challenges face California sweet potato growers.

"Water and labor are our main concerns," he said. "Without clean surface water the roots will not produce nor store the way we need them to."

Salinity in ground water is another concern and therefore not the favored irrigation source, he said.

Competition originates across the continental U.S.

"The Southern growing regions in the United States can be the biggest competition for fresh retail, as they are able to produce sweet potatoes at a fraction of the cost of California," he said. "Fortunately our soil, water and climate provide us with quality roots to maintain our market share."

The best news coming from the fields is the health benefits of the colorful globes, he said.

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S17-4/#7