

# Sweet potatoes get a trial run in SE Oregon

By **BRETT TALLMAN**  
For the Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — With 20,000 acres of onions planted in southeastern Oregon, the area produces nearly a quarter of the nation's storage-onion crop.

"Onions are the lifeblood of the area's economy," Stuart Reitz, a professor with Oregon State University's Malheur County Extension, said. "It's a huge economic engine that supports several hundred growers, processors and three dozen shipping companies."

With the help of Joel Felix, an associate professor with OSU's Agricultural Experiment Station in Malheur County, Froerer Farms of Nyssa, Ore., is testing a new crop for the area.

Felix was born and raised in Tanzania, an African nation that, in 2014, produced more than 3 million tons of sweet potatoes.

"The sweet potato is not new



Capital Press File

Joel Felix, an associate professor with Oregon State University's Agricultural Experiment Station in Malheur County, is working with a local farm to grow sweet potatoes.

to me," Felix said. "I know it very well; I know the length of time to get a crop and I thought we had enough time to get a crop here."

In 2010, he put together a demonstration showing that

sweet potatoes could be grown in the Treasure Valley.

Word spread about Felix's demonstration. Potato processors in Oregon and Idaho wanted to know more.

"We have a lot of proces-

sors locally who truck in sweet potatoes from North Carolina and California," Felix said. "By procuring potatoes grown locally, they thought they could cut down the cost of transportation."

The following year, Felix

conducted an experiment looking at varieties and irrigation criteria. After picking the brains of growers in North Carolina and California, he narrowed his search to four varieties suitable for Eastern Oregon's climate.

"We settled on Covington," he said. "The variety has orange flesh and some good qualities like resistance to disease and insects."

Covingtons mature in 90 to 120 days, a suitable window for the growing season in the area. At the end of May, sweet potatoes are transplanted to fields and, by the beginning of October, they're ready to harvest.

"Another good thing, (the sweet potato) doesn't use water anywhere close to what Irish potatoes use," Felix said. "Sweet potatoes are from the tropics; they don't want to be cooled."

"We grew our first crop in 2016," Craig Froerer, CEO of Froerer Farms, said. "About

40 acres. I'd say we had moderate success, but we have a lot to learn."

Froerer estimated that No. 1-grade sweet potatoes went for 18 cents a pound, while No. 2 and oversized sweet potatoes went for about 10 cents a pound.

No. 1s were fresh packed at Owyhee Produce and sold to retailers, while No. 2s and oversized went to processors in Western Oregon and Eastern Idaho.

Though Froerer does not expect sweet potatoes to replace the 800 acres of onions that make up his primary cash crop, Froerer Farms did invest in specialized equipment, including a sweet potato harvester.

"Looking at his investments, I'd say he's serious about it," Felix said. "He's the only grower in the area with the harvesting equipment and he is continuing to grow them, so the checkbook must be balancing."

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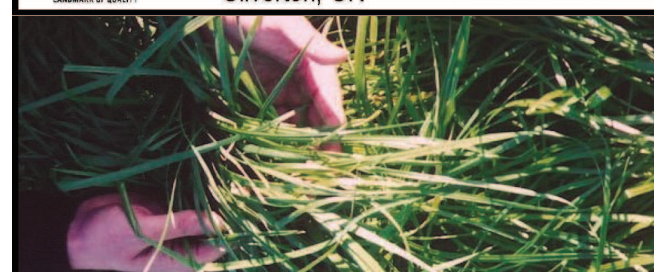
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