

What’s in a potato?



Hermiston potato farmer Greg Juul points out the shallow eye of the Russet-Norkotah variety of potato he is currently harvesting outside of Hermiston.

Spuds pack more nutrients than many realize

By JADE MCDOWELL
EO Media Group

Potatoes get a bad rap when it comes to nutrition, but research geneticist Roy Navarre says they’re actually a nutrient-dense food.

“It’s a common misperception that if you eat a potato you’re only getting starch,” he said.

It’s those types of misconceptions he’ll be challenging during his presentation “What’s in a Potato?” during the Hermiston Farm Fair & Trade Show.

Navarre is a research geneticist and adjunct professor at the Washington State University Irrigated Agriculture Research and Extension Center in Prosser. He has been studying potato disease resistance and the nutritional enhancement of potatoes.

It’s true potatoes have a lot of starch in them, he said, but everyone needs complex carbohydrates in their diet, and potatoes are one of the primary sources of potassium. They also have a range of other vitamins and minerals.

“They do have quite a bit of vitamin C,” Navarre said.

It’s also a misconception that most of

the nutrients in a potato are in the skin. Navarre said there might higher concentrations there, but peeling a potato still leaves plenty of nutrients in the flesh.

One study found that potatoes, along with beans, provide the most nutrients per dollar when it comes to growing crops. They are the fourth largest crop in the world. That makes them a key to fighting hunger worldwide, Navarre said, noting that China recently announced potatoes are going to be a key means of providing food security for its citizens.

“Potatoes are our stars, in a way,” Navarre said.

As a result, Navarre and his team at the extension center in Prosser are studying thousands of genotypes for potatoes in the hopes of finding ways to increase the crop’s nutritional value.

The researchers are doing controlled experiments to study the affects of soil type, climate and other environmental factors on the concentration of vitamins and minerals in the potatoes. They are also looking at different varieties of potatoes and whether it makes a difference when the potatoes are harvested.

Navarre said baby potatoes, or new

potatoes, tend to have the highest nutritional value.

The color of the potato makes a difference too, he said. Yellow potatoes have a particularly high level of carotenoids, for example.

“There can be quite a lot of difference,” he said.

Potatoes are Oregon’s seventh largest crop by value. The 2015 potato harvest yielded 1.1 million tons of potatoes grown on 38,900 acres. Umatilla County and Morrow County combined account for more than half that total, according to the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

Hermiston’s own Agricultural Research and Extension Center also studies potatoes, including experiments to increase their nutritional value. Sagar Sathuvalli, assistant professor of potato breeding and genetics, leads HAREC’s research program aimed at developing potatoes that are more nutritious and less susceptible to disease and pests.

Northwest potato production drops despite more acres

By JOHN O’CONNELL
EO Media Group

Potato production is down about 2 percent, both in Idaho and throughout the Northwest, even though growers planted more acres, according to a Nov. 10 USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service report.

The NASS report also shows a significant decline in the percentage of high-quality potatoes. Upon learning that the crop might be smaller than many believed at harvest, industry sources say fresh sheds have slowed down shipments, contributing to price increases.

Idaho growers planted 325,000 acres of potatoes, up 4,000 acres from last season, but challenging weather conditions reduced yields by 13 hundredweight per acre to 402 hundredweight per acre. Idaho production dropped to 132.32 million hundredweight, down from 132.88 million hundredweight last season.

Washington growers increased their spud plantings by 5,000 acres to 170,000 acres, but their yields per acre dropped by 25 hundredweight to 590 hundredweight, lowering total production from 101.475 million hundredweight to 100.3 million hundredweight.

Oregon’s potato crop held steady at 39,000 acres, but average yields per acre dropped by 20 hundredweight to 560 hundredweight. Oregon’s total production dropped from 22.562 million hundredweight to 21.784 million hundredweight.

The U.S. crop was up slightly, at 445.602 million hundredweight compared with 442.17 million hundredweight.

Further reducing the supply of top-quality potatoes, the percentage of Idaho spuds that met No. 1 specifications dropped from 80.1 percent in 2014 to 73.7 percent this season, and the percentage of culls increased by 0.2 percent to 1.5 percent, according to NASS.

Washington’s No. 1 spuds, at 74.9 percent, were down 3.7 percent, and its culls increased by half a percent. NASS estimated 75.5 percent of Oregon spuds graded No. 1, down 3.1 percent, and culls increased by nearly a full percentage.

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