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Connecting the Market Dots

Markets close, new ones open and farmers have to keep up.

Agriculture isn't just a matter of growing crops. Farmers need markets. And new tastes and needs are always closing old markets and opening new ones. The Land-Grant University and USDA partnership continually supports the dynamics that keep farmers and consumers connected.

Payoff

- **Tomato time.** Everybody wants great-tasting tomatoes, but nobody wants to wait for tomato season. In Colorado, greenhouse growers have expanded tomato time year-round. **Colorado State** Extension specialists continually evaluated crops, identified diseases and insects, provided an online newsletter, taught workshops and worked with growers on research projects while offering a Web-based course in greenhouse management. The longer-ripened greenhouse tomato has paid off well, with sales increasing from \$5 million to \$40 million in the past five years.
- **Diplomatic crops.** Sweet potatoes are easy to grow and store, but in many cultures the flavor is considered too strong. They're far too rich in nutrients, though, not to grow them in countries with large, poor populations. So **Georgia** horticulturists studied sweet potato flavor chemistry and came up with a unique sweet potato clone that resembles a baked white potato in color, flavor and texture but still has the same sweet potato nutrients. The new clone has fast become a valuable breeding line around the world. North Korea, with an estimated 2 million famine-related deaths over the past four years, sent scientists to study and acquire the new sweet potato to use in their breeding programs. It was the first North Korean academic visit to the United States since the Communist takeover.
- **Eat your beans.** Growing numbers of shoppers buy organic farm products. At the same time, many small-scale farmers can't compete with big farms at growing traditional crops. With help from the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, **Virginia State** scientists promote organic certification for small-scale farmers. In the past two years, the number of new Virginia certified organic farms has grown by more than 30 percent to 120 farms totaling 6,483 acres. One new crop may be vegetable soybeans. Virginia State researchers have developed 17

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new breeding lines. With 70 percent of U.S. vegetable soybeans now imported, the crop may one day, at the current growth rate, replace tobacco as Virginia small farmers' best cash crop.

- **New berries.** Shoppers increasingly are looking for foods with high antioxidant content. Blueberries have very high levels, but you'd have to eat a cup of fresh berries every day to get enough in your diet to help. A **Georgia** food scientist found a way to monitor antioxidant levels in blueberries during processing and came up with a raisin-like dried-berry product with five times the antioxidant level of an equal volume of fresh berries. A team of **Rutgers** scientists developed four blueberry products: a juice, sports drink, solid extract and iced tea. The tea is now sold as "Jersey Blues." These products will make it easier for consumers to get effective dietary levels of antioxidants.
- **Egg-citing.** With high-fat, high-cholesterol diets linked to heart disease and cancer, Americans are looking for ways to eat better. **Wisconsin** poultry scientists and a graduate student developed a way to produce vitamin-E-enriched eggs with 25 percent less fat and cholesterol than regular eggs. The new eggs, under the name "Eggstasy," are now sold in supermarkets in 25 states.
- **Chevon chase.** Growing ethnic populations are fast expanding the market for chevon, or goat meat. But North Carolina farmers had no centralized processing or marketing tools for goats. **North Carolina A&T** helped growers organize a cooperative and pass certification tests and USDA inspections. Now, 40 farmers are certified and able to sell to a grocery chain with seven stores that cater to ethnic markets. **Fort Valley State University-Georgia** and **Florida A&M** faculty have similar goat-meat marketing programs.
- **Say cheese.** It's not necessarily all that fat that makes cheeses taste so good. Researchers at the **Wisconsin** Center for Dairy Research have developed ways to make a cheddar cheese that has 50 percent less fat but tastes much like full-fat cheddar. The techniques for reducing fat while maintaining flavor and texture can be applied to any cheese. Many U.S. companies are now using the findings to make reduced-fat products that give cheese lovers something to smile about.

- **Food in the bank.** If produce has a blemish or the meat isn't exactly the right color, most shoppers don't buy it. That's a shame, since people who don't have much money to buy food can't afford to be picky. The **Ohio State** Extension staff helped organize and link the state's fruit, vegetable and poultry farmers with the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks. Growers were paid enough to cover harvesting, packing and transportation costs for their surplus. And in the last five months of 2001, the state's low-income residents received more than 4.5 million pounds of fresh produce and meat.
- **Farmers market.** Many Kentucky farmers have a ready market for fresh produce and a good idea how to grow it. But they needed help with the marketing part. **Kentucky State** Extension specialists helped farmers stage an annual field day and farm tour to let people see how the produce was grown and promote the new Fairview Produce Auction. The farmers sold \$100,000 worth of produce in the first year. In 2001, 60 growers had produce sales topping \$650,000.
- **Low-fat muffin.** If you're overweight (and a fourth of us are), you're three times more likely to have heart and circulatory problems than normal-weight people. A great way to control your weight is to eat low-calorie and low-fat foods. **Virginia Tech** nutrition researchers have come up with a muffin that tastes as good as a full-fat muffin but has 75 percent less fat. The new muffins, sold by at least one interstate bakery, expand shoppers' low-fat choices as well as the market for Virginia soft red winter wheat.



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