

# Louisiana Sweet Potato News



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## **Sweet Potato Crop Update** *Tara Smith, Assistant Professor and Sweet Potato Specialist, LSU AgCenter*

The sweet potato planting season is well under way. Most producers began planting in early May. As of May 25, approximately 40-50% of the 2007 crop was in the ground. Weather and labor force permitting, the majority of the crop should be planted by June 15. In light of last seasons adverse harvest conditions, producers statewide are trying to get the crop off and running as soon as possible. Initial plantings have really taken off in recent weeks, and plant stands are solid in most locations.

Reports on plant production in plant beds and observations of plant beds across the state have varied. Some producers were hit harder than others by the adverse harvest conditions in 2006, and, therefore, some of the seed being used this year was subjected to stressful conditions. It has not delivered the plant populations expected.

Weather conditions have been favorable across the state. Some parts of West Carroll and Morehouse parishes have been a little dry but soil moisture has been adequate for early plantings. Producers also dealt with some north winds the week of May 14 that slowed planting operations and negatively affected some transplants that were planted under these conditions.

South Louisiana, similar to the 2006 planting season, has received intermittent rainfall, making producers very pleased with their planting conditions. Troy Fruge, a producer in Acadia Parish, indicated that the weather had been very cooperative. "Our planting is going well. We are catching afternoon showers, and the moisture in combination with overcast conditions is helping our plant stand." We have approximately 45% of our crop planted and hope to finish up around the 10<sup>th</sup> of June." Mr. Fruge added, "Our plant beds have been a little behind this year. We usually plant about 70% of our crop with the first cutting, and this year we are

closer to 50%.” The difference he is seeing is in part being attributed to stressed seed in a couple of plant beds.

Todd Cullen, a producer in Avoyelles Parish, indicated that his plant production was good and similar to previous years. “We usually have good luck with plant beds, and the weather has been perfect this year.” In addition, Mr. Cullen indicated that approximately 70% of his crop was planted and that he expected to wrap up planting activities in early June.

Producers in Louisiana have high expectations for the 2007 production season. Ken Thornhill of Thornhill Farms in Franklin Parish is very encouraged about this year and is planning a moderate increase in acreage. He mirrors others in the state in his feelings that Louisiana can definitely support an acreage increase and that an increase is necessary and important for Louisiana to remain a leader in the industry. Mr. Thornhill also indicated that he was excited about the current price he is receiving for the 2006 crop.

I too, am optimistic about the 2007 season. I wish everyone well as they complete their planting operations, and I look forward to visiting and working you this production season.

## **Early Season Scouting**

*Tara Smith*

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With approximately 50% of this year's crop planted, it is a good time to start monitoring and scouting your production fields.

Routine visits to production fields by producers and/or crop consultants are necessary to identify early season insect problems and nutrient deficiencies that may possibly be corrected with timely insecticide applications and foliar/sidedress applications of fertilizers. Scouting for adult insects (cucumber beetles, white fringed beetles, sweetpotato weevils, flea beetles) should begin soon after transplant, within 2 weeks of transplanting and should continue on a weekly basis. Cucumber beetles were the most common insect problem in sweet potato fields in 2006. The treatment threshold for these insects is two beetles per 100 sweeps. Please visit our Web site: [www.lsuagcenter.com](http://www.lsuagcenter.com) for more information concerning management options and recommendations for your crop. If you have questions or concerns about your crop please contact your local extension agent and/or Tara Smith.

## **Sweet Potato Verification Program**

*Dr. Tara Smith, extension specialist and Dr. Kurt Guidry, LSU AgCenter agricultural economics and agribusiness*

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Louisiana is a leader in sweet potato production in the United States, second only to North Carolina. According to the LSU AgCenter's Ag Summary, slightly over 17,000 acres of sweet potatoes were grown commercially in 10 parishes during 2005 and 2006.

Farm gate value of sweet potato production in 2005 and 2006 totaled \$53.4 and \$58.7 million, respectively. Average producer revenue per acre harvested has averaged roughly \$3,250 per acre over the past two years, making it the highest ranked row crop in the state in terms of revenue generated per acre.

However, with production, packaging and storage costs ranging from \$1,500 to \$3,000 per acre, it also is the most expensive row crop produced in the state. With the considerable variability in production costs, there is a high level of variability in potential profitability. Therefore, the value of a verification program to highlight those areas in which efficiencies and cost reductions can be gained and production and financial risks can be minimized would be extremely valuable to the

participating producer and the industry as a whole.

A pilot verification program is currently being initiated this year in West Carroll Parish on one producer's farm. The concept of the program is similar to that of the rice and soybean verification programs in Louisiana. These programs have been very successful and have had a positive influence on rice and soybean production.

The sweet potato verification program encompasses many aspects of production and begins with field identification, seed selection, fertilization and plant bed production and management. Several other aspects of production are monitored throughout the course of the production season, including, but not limited to: plant spacing, insect, disease and weed management and irrigation. At harvest, yield data will be collected, and an economic analysis will be conducted.

The aim of this program is to extend information to producers by evaluating the LSU AgCenter's current recommendation practices for sweet potato on farm. With the information generated regarding production practices and economic performance of the operation, the sweet potato research verification program hopefully can start

to identify those issues and areas of sweet potato production that offer the most potential for efficiency and profitability gains. Consequently, the sweet potato research verification program holds the potential of providing an excellent educational opportunity for LSU AgCenter personnel and producers alike.

Knowledge gained from this program can be used to improve and further develop recommendations for sweet potato production, with the goals of stratifying the sweet potato industry in Louisiana and ensuring that producers remain successful.

### **Market Outlook**

*Tara Smith*

The supply of Louisiana sweet potatoes is running low. Several producers have finished moving their 2006 crop, while the remaining 2006 crop continues to bring a good price. As of May 22, 2007, the FOB price for a cured 40 lb box of U.S. #1 grade sweet potatoes was \$17-17.50. Brokers indicate that the market is strong, and if movement of the crop continues as it has over the past couple of weeks, Louisiana will be out of sweet potatoes in mid-June.

That said, movement of the 2007 crop will begin soon after initial harvest. The green market will be

dictated by the supply of cured sweet potatoes remaining in other sweet potato producing states. Most markets and buyers do prefer a cured product, which is expected to be available in Louisiana in early September.

### **Variety Update: "Evangeline"**

*Tara Smith*

Several boxes of Evangeline seed were given to producers around the state earlier this year for demonstration and research purposes. This seed was harvested under adverse conditions in early November 2006 and has not sprouted as well as I had hoped.

On a positive note, several producers around the state who saved seed from research plots have had great success with this variety in plant beds this year (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Mr. Lee Jones, Producer West Carroll Parish, and Mr. Myrl Sistrunk, County Agent, West Carroll Parish, inspect an Evangeline plant bed.

In addition, LSU AgCenter sweet potato breeder Don

Labonte, indicated that Evangeline has performed well in his research plant beds. We will be monitoring the variety on several farms this year. Observations of the different seed sources in plant beds this year, underscores the importance of using high quality seed for commercial production. Please contact us with questions regarding "Evangeline" or any other aspects of the sweet potato breeding and foundation seed programs.

## Industry News

### **Crop Insurance Committee meets with Risk Management Agency**

Louisiana sweet potato producers have supported and participated in the pilot sweet potato crop insurance program since its inception. A group of Louisiana sweet potato industry representatives traveled to Kansas City in early May to discuss the current crop insurance policy. The group presented views and recommendations regarding the sweet potato crop insurance program to the USDA Risk Management Agency. The meeting was successful in that both groups came away with an improved understanding of the current situation and were in agreement that changes to the current policy were needed. Those in attendance included: Brian Breaux, Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation; James Deshotel, producer

Avoyelles Parish; Larry Fontenot, producer Evangeline Parish; Lee Lois Jones, producer West Carroll Parish; Mark Fields, President Louisiana Sweet Potato Association; and Tara Smith, LSU AgCenter sweet potato specialist.

### **June Meeting of the Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission**

The June meeting of the Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission will take place Tuesday, June 19, 2007, at the Hilton Hotel in Baton Rouge, La. (201 Lafayette Street.) The meeting will begin at 10:00 a.m.

### **2008 National Convention**

The 2008 meeting of the National Sweet Potato Council will be held in Asheville, NC at Grove Park Inn. Dates for the meeting are January 20-22, 2008.

### **Recipe of the Day**

#### *Apple Cinnamon Sweet Potato Muffins* ([www.sweetpotato.org](http://www.sweetpotato.org))

3/4 cup oat bran  
3/4 cup whole-wheat flour  
2/3 cup sugar  
1 1/2 tsp. cinnamon  
1 tsp. baking powder  
1 tsp. baking soda  
1/8 tsp. salt  
1/2 cup apples, skinless, finely chopped  
1 cup fresh sweet potatoes (yams), cooked and mashed or 1(15 oz.) can sweet potatoes, drained and mashed  
1 large egg  
2 large egg whites  
3 tbsps. vegetable oil  
2/3 cup plain yogurt

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a bowl, combine bran, flour, sugar, cinnamon, baking powder, baking soda, salt and apples. Add sweet potatoes, egg, egg whites, oil and yogurt. Stir all ingredients thoroughly. Spray muffin tins with

vegetable cooking spray and spoon 1/4 cup of batter per muffin. Bake for 20-25 minutes or until done.

Makes approximately 20 muffins.

Per serving: CAL 98 (24% from fat); FAT 3g; PROTEIN 4g; CARB 18g; CHOL 11mg; SODIUM 119mg

Variation: Add 1 cup of raisins.

LSU AgCenter Extension personnel are available to assist you with all of your crop needs. Please call on us if we can be of assistance.

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