PROJECT FACT SHEET

OKLAHOMA PRODUCER GRANT PROGRAM
The Kerr Center
FUNDING FARMER INNOVATION

YEAR GRANT AWARDED: 2001

AREA 8: Farm Diversification and Increased Profitability

PRINCIPAL COOPERATOR
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OTHER COOPERATORS
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PROJECT BASICS
Duration: Three years (2001-2003)
Type: Research project
Grant Amount: $7,479
Location: Calvin, Hughes County

Sam and Willa Mae McClure

A Production and Marketing Study of Sweet Onions for Southeastern Oklahoma

Margo Hale, ATTRA, for the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture

FARM/RANCH PROFILE

Sam McClure operates 1,700 acres (owned and rented) along the South Canadian River in Hughes County, Oklahoma. He runs a 200-unit cow/calf operation, and produces rye, peanuts, and other crops.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

McClure had been working on establishing sweet onion production as a replacement crop for peanuts. Through trial and error he learned how to grow and handle the crop, but still needed more information about what varieties and marketing options work best. The overall goal of this project was to conduct variety trials and market testing to determine the best sweet onion variety for his operation.

KERR CENTER

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His project objectives were to:

1. Find cultural methods and varieties that will ensure delivery of a sweet onion crop that is of sufficient quality and quantity to meet market demands.
2. Identify the best distribution and marketing opportunities for sweet onions.
3. Develop cost/benefit ratios for several possible distribution methods.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Cultivation Practices and Variety Trials:
McClure grew sweet onions for three years prior to receiving the Kerr Center Producer Grant. During that time he found that transplanting was better than direct seeding. He also tested six different varieties and found that 1015Y and Yellow Granex were viable varieties. Further testing was needed to determine preferred varieties and optimal planting and harvest times.

During McClure's project, concurrent variety trials were conducted at the Wes Watkins Agriculture Research and Extension Center in Lane, Oklahoma.

***Marketing*:**
McClure had experience marketing through produce stands, peddlers, and direct sales. He needed to further explore marketing to restaurants, wholesalers, and other buyers. The Producer Grant allowed McClure to evaluate different markets and determine which market is most reliable.

Sam McClure

PROJECT RESULTS

Cultivation Practices:
McClure used various cultivation practices in his onion production, including planting a cover crop, deep plowing, disking, bedding, and proper watering. Using these techniques, McClure had success in growing sweet onions, indicating onions are well suited to southeastern Oklahoma.

Finding commercially available onion transplants that would produce in Oklahoma was a challenge, as most transplants are grown south of Oklahoma

where winter temperatures are warmer. There were onion varieties that proved to do well in Oklahoma, but there was no commercially available supply of transplants for those varieties.

McClure struggled to find a reliable source of onion transplants. He used locally grown transplants for a while, but had problems with inconsistent quality. McClure now uses transplants from a commercial grower in Arizona.

Once he found a variety that worked well for him, McClure had no problem growing onions. His production peaked at around 20 acres of onions. He is now only growing about three acres of onions because he has diversified with other crops.

McClure also noted that labor was another challenge to onion production. Setting out transplants and harvesting the onions is all handwork, so it is very labor intensive.

Variety Trials:

The first year of the project McClure tested Yellow, White Granex, and Texas 1015Y varieties. Equal amounts of each variety were planted over four acres. The quality of onions produced was high, but the yield was below expectations.

McClure grew yellow and white Granex, 1015Y Texas Super Sweet, Candy, and Stockton Sweet Red onions for the second year of the project. The onions were planted on three foot wide beds on six foot centers with two rows planted per bed. Planting density was approximately 29,000 plants per acre.

In the final year of the Producer Grant project, McClure completed a variety trial using 20 yellow cultivars and five red cultivars. Of the yellow varieties tested, Madero and Cimarron produced the greatest quantity of bulbs measuring three inches in diameter or greater. Varieties that produced a high proportion of bulbs greater than two inches in diameter included Legend, Renegade, Candy, DPS 1051, DPSX 1044, Yellow Granex, and SRO 4000. Cimarron, Madero, Renegade, SRO 4001 and SRO 4000 were the highest yielding varieties. Of the red varieties, DPSX 3040 produced the largest bulbs, but bulb diameter was highly variable. The majority of bulbs of DPS 3033 and Rumba were between two to four inches in diameter.

It took McClure several years of testing to find a variety that worked well for him. He found that the Candy variety works very well for him and his markets.

Marketing:

Finding reliable markets proved to be the most difficult part of producing onions. McClure found that local farmers' markets seemed to be well supplied by small growers. In the project's first year he found a potential market at Fire Lake Discount Food in Shawnee, Oklahoma. He provided young green onions with bulbs one inch in diameter to this market. He shipped White Granex and Texas 1015Y onions to the market in 5-pound boxes. White Granex was shoppers' preferred choice. In the second year of the project, Fire Lake continued to provide a reliable market for green onions with bulbs up to two inches.

McClure also sent several boxes of onions to the Dallas Vegetable Market to sample the demand for green onions. These onions sold quickly and additional orders were placed, indicating a potential market at the Dallas Market. Local independent brokers paid a premium for McClure's fresh sweet onions, which they picked up at his packing shed. McClure marketed his fresh onions at $6.00 to $8.00 per box.

In the second year of the project, McClure sold the majority of the onion crop at the Dallas Vegetable Market. He sold 25-pound boxes to a broker at the market and was able to move the entire crop in a timely manner. He also sold the Candy onions to Nichols Discount Food stores, and local roadside vegetable peddlers purchased a considerable quantity.

McClure has continued to sell his onions, and other crops, at Dallas- and Tulsa-area farmers' markets. He is now entering a new marketing venture, Granny's Garden. Granny's Garden is an on-farm produce store that will sell onions, sweet corn, pumpkins, watermelons, and other crops.

SUMMARY

While there were some frustrations with sources of plants and marketing ventures, McClure said this project was very rewarding. He would like to see other producers follow in his footsteps to market produce locally on a larger scale than farmers' markets. He knows that there are challenges with marketing, but thinks producers could work together to fill buyers' demands.

McClure found that obstacles to onion production in Oklahoma include labor costs and market access. However, there is a demand for sweet onions, and several varieties produce well in Oklahoma. McClure determined that adding sweet onions to his farm was a viable enterprise.