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Changing With The Times

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Blue Sky Farms

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Growers are masters of adaptation, which a Florida potato farmer says is essential in today's economic and regulatory environment.

By Frank Giles

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Hastings has been a center of agriculture in St. Johns County for more than a century. The farming tradition runs deep in the area, and Danny Johns' family has four generations rooted in the soils there. Like many, Johns' farming operation is based in potato production, which the area is noted for. But, in the competitive and always challenging world of farming, he says one must be quick to adapt and on a constant quest for improvement.

"I wouldn't bet against a farmer," says Johns. "We buy a new piece of equipment and the first thing we do is get out the welder and start tweaking it to our needs. We can adapt to a lot of conditions and challenges."

After years in chip production, Johns began moving into table-stock production about 11 years ago with a focus on capitalizing on niche markets.

"The competition in the chip market just got to be too much," says Johns. "It is all about the pre-booked contract price and driving the price lower. We switched to table-stock and

don't contract anything. So we live by the sword and die by the sword when it comes to market prices, but we don't have things dictated to us."

The sword cut the wrong way last May when more than 20 inches of rain hit the Hastings area during harvest time. According to Johns, last season was his worst ever, but fortunately the year before that was one of his best. So goes the fortune of the farmer.

Only The Flexible Survive

No farmer can survive today's harsh economic environment without being flexible and providing consumers what they want. To meet his customers' demands, Johns grows 18 varieties of red, white, yellow, and fingerling potatoes on about 600 acres. His packinghouse can accommodate package sizes from 2 pounds to 2,000 and can process about 15 semi loads per day when in full swing.

He is among the growers who produce the low-carb Sunlight brand of potatoes. "We missed the peak of the Atkins craze, but still see great potential health benefits," Johns says. His latest move to meet growing consumer demand is planting fingerling potatoes.

"We are trying to develop more of a specialty market with the fingerlings that will garner a good premium," says Johns. "They are harder to grow than mainstream varieties like russets and reds, but they catch the consumer's eye and are great flavored roasting potatoes."

Johns has several fingerling varieties planted this season — Russian Banana, French, Purple Peruvian, Austrian Crescent, and Peter Wilcox. He is packaging them in a medley mix with red, yellow, and purple potatoes, which makes for a nice display.

"It's a work in progress," is how Johns describes his packinghouse line, which employees around 65 people during the heart of the season. Every season, he says tweaks are made to improve efficiency of the facility.

"Three years ago, we totally revamped the packing line," says Johns. "We put in a Odenberg Optical Sorter, which uses an electronic eye to automatically grade and sort the potatoes as they come off the wash line. This has created a big labor saving for us."

Food Safety

With new food safety regulations on the way, Johns is gearing up for

the new rules. But, he has been on the cutting edge of food safety practices for years. The farm and packing facility is Primus certified, which runs drills for traceability and recalls.

"We have markers on all our packages using a code imprinting system," he says. "We are looking into more computerized tracking technologies, but we are working within a budget and have to add things like this in bite-sized chunks."

"With all the different package sizes and varieties, it is a challenge to keep up with traceability. In fact, we've hired two full-time employees just to make sure all the data is properly accounted for."

Regulatory Roadblocks

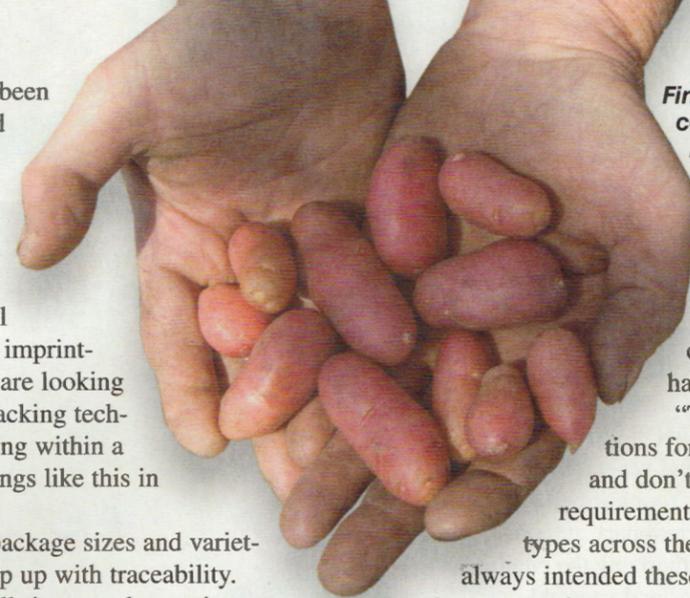
For all the success Blue Sky Farms has enjoyed over the years because of its flexibility and innovation, Johns worries that an increasingly stringent regulatory environment could threaten the viability of agriculture.

"We are in an already competitive industry," says Johns. "If we are put at some disadvantage through a regulation of how much fertilizer we can use or water related issues, there's nothing keeping my customers from finding product elsewhere at a cheaper price."

"At an industry meeting in Orlando last year, I told the group this was the first time I felt threatened for our way of life because of all these regulations that we are facing."

The regulatory hurdles are stacked high whether it is EPA numeric standards for nutrients in runoff, new soil fumigant regulations and the end of methyl bromide, and future rules relating to food safety. All of these issues come at a cost — a cost usually borne most heavily by the grower.

Currently, Johns is working with UF/IFAS, the Florida Department of Agriculture, and the water management



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district on how fertilizer recommendations for potatoes are handled under the BMP program. "The fertilizer recommendations for potatoes are one-size-fits-all and don't take into account the differing requirements for different varieties or soil types across the state," he says. "IFAS had always intended these to be simply recommendations to incorporate into a grower's specific operation. But now, these recommendations are turning into regulations."

Growers will be required to file a notice of intent that they will follow the fertilizer recommendation. If they do not, they will have to prove through their own testing they are having no impact on the environment and water quality.

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Get Involved

Johns has been very active with industry associations on the local, state, and national level. He serves on the board of directors of Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, serves as president of the North Florida Growers Exchange, and is on the National Potato Council.

"Growers need to be at the table," he says. "There are very consequential decisions being made right now in terms of policy and regulations that will directly impact our ability to farm. We all are facing the impact of these issues together, so we need to present a united front and make agriculture's voice heard." 

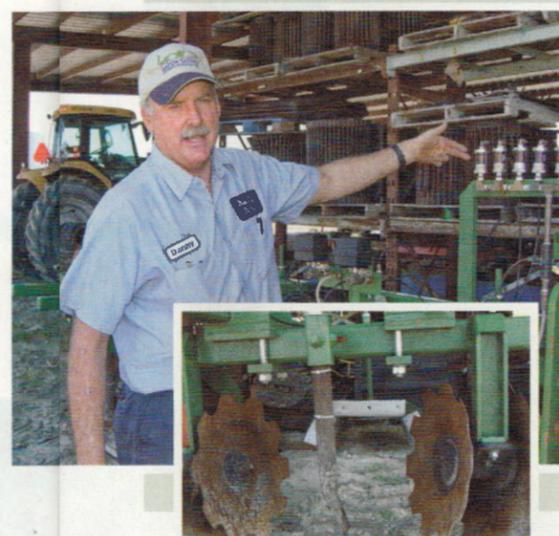
Rigging The Rig For New Regs

Like most growers, Danny Johns is quick to tweak equipment for needs on the farm. Probably the most important adjustment lately is the work done on his fumigant rig, since methyl bromide is being phased out and new stringent rules for other fumigants are being phased in.

He runs the fumigant applicator after fertilizer has been incorporated, so it is running on flat ground. The rig has a single knife in front of large disks, which immediately cover the fumigant after it is knifed in. On the backside of the machine is a pack pan, which closes any escape paths for the fumigant.

"We ran a third party Flux test on the rig this year for EPA data, and the results were very good," says Johns. "The study had an assumed worst-case value of how much fumigant would escape. The trial showed the rig's application was much lower than the assumed value."

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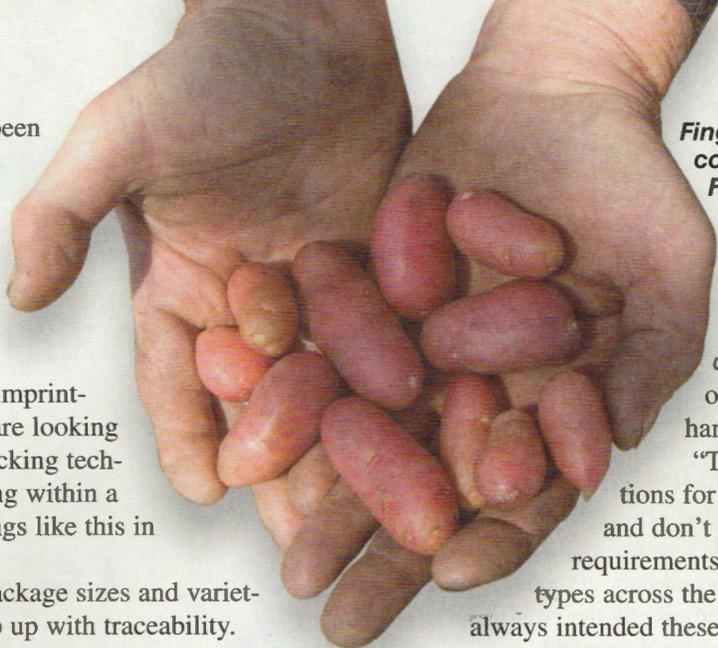
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