GROWING SWEET CORN FOR WHOLESALE MARKETS

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With the ever increasing cost of inputs to grow a crop of sweet corn for the wholesale market place, making it a profitable business is a challenge.

First off, this year you had to deal with the price of fuel and fertilizer doubling, the cost of seed and crop protectants up 20-30%, the cost of labor, and the cost of maintaining Good Ag Practice (GAP) certification. On top of all this, weather and insect pressure are variable and have to be dealt with. All this needs to be managed while meeting the USDA standards for a fancy box of corn.

Upon the completion of growing a corn crop, harvesting, packing, and shipping are the next items to be dealt with. We mechanically harvest our corn. To do this we have two Pixall corn pullers and two Byron harvesters to use in case of down corn. All the corn is within a four mile radius of our packinghouse and transported to it with tractors and wagons. Once it enters the packing house we grade it to meet the USDA requirements for a US Fancy box of corn.   As the crates of corn come off the packing line they are stacked 35 boxes to a pallet.

Once the corn is palletized we then run it through a Hydro-cooler for 45 minutes in 38degree water to bring the pulp temperature down to 42 degrees. It is then stacked up to 42 boxes to a pallet and either loaded on a truck or stored in our cold room at 38 degrees. After a truck is loaded, we then put 2500 to 3000 pounds of top ice on it. The ice is meant to melt at a slow rate to keep the corn wet. The trucks are refrigerated and kept at 38 degrees.

Growing conditions can play a role in selling your crop. Too dry or too wet growing conditions can make the quality of your crop suffer. Poor quality results in a lower price for your product. Insect pressure can lead to problems too. When you are on a close spray schedule and it rains a lot, you can miss a spray. This can lead to pests such as corn borer and earworm larvae in your crop and all the problems associated with them.

We market our corn up and down the east coast, as far west as Texas and export to Puerto Rico and England. To do this we have two salesmen on our farm from July to the first of October. We supply many chain stores, the major terminal markets and distribution houses around the country. This can be a challenge for many different reasons. At the time of year that we have corn, so does most of the country. If all the growing regions have a good crop, the market tends to be weak. If one or more regions have a short crop, marketing opportunities become available and generally the price goes up.

The changing face of today's agricultural community is another aspect that has impacted the profitability of our farm. Being a "large farm in a small community" has its challenges. As a larger farm we have a large investment in equipment, buildings, refrigeration, crop specific packaging, storage, handling equipment, and costly investments in food safety requirements in order to be GAP certified. These are required by most chain stores, distribution centers, and other customers in order to sell our corn to them. The recent onset of the "buy local" campaign has affected the way our clients do business with-in the farming community. In the past, stores would pull product from a central warehouse supplied by larger farms such as ourselves. Individual stores may buy local produce through the back door from smaller local growers, who are not necessarily burdened with the certifications and overhead costs of a large scale grower. This has cut down on the amount of product the stores take from their warehouse. Because of this trend, the amount of corn we send to the chains is less than it has been in the past.

To combat this trend we have had to find new markets for our corn. One way we have changed our customer base is to sell a greater share of our crop to the western states. Another is an increase in export business to other countries.