Louisiana-grown potatoes may offer alternative

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An experimental plot of Atlantic variety white potatoes, grown in Louisiana, offers sugarcane farmers a potential alternative crop, according to Raymond Folse, horticultural area agent for Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes.

Phil Massey, a spokesman for the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, said the test crop of potatoes was grown to determine whether sugarcane farmers can use part of their unplanted acreage for another cash crop.

"As the economic crunch comes down in Louisiana, the farmers can't make it on one crop hardly," Massey said.

Extension assistant specialist James Boudreaux said potatoes are considered a quick crop. He estimated it was possible to make from $300 to $400 an acre.

But potatoes are considered a higher-risk crop because a large rain at the time of harvest can ruin them, Boudreaux said.

Harvesting the white potato also requires some special equipment that would entail a significant investment by the farmer, and the potato needs to be planted in sandy soil, Boudreaux said.

"We are encouraging farmers to be conservative and gamble no more than they can afford to lose," he added.

The test crop of white potatoes was grown by John Malbrough outside the Bayou Dularge community in Terrebonne Parish in conjunction with Extension.

The test crop also was used this week in the production of a batch of Zapp's potato chips, Massey said.

"From the bags, salt, boxes, the kettle-type fryers, peanut oil, and now the potatoes, these chips are 100 percent Louisiana," said Ron Zappe, president of Zapp's Potato Chips in Gramercy.

"Personally, I find the potatoes to be outstanding, and the quality of the potato chips is proof of the product," Zappe said Friday.

Boudreaux said the white potatoes also are a good fresh-market potato for baking and frying.

"They make nice french fries to go with catfish and things like that," he said.

Zappe estimated that his company uses one-third of a million pounds of Atlantic variety potatoes a week in the spring and summer months to produce Zapp's chips. A northern-produced potato, Norchip, is used in the fall and winter months.

The Atlantic variety potato is ideal for the production of potato chips because it is thin-skinned and has a low moisture and sugar content, all of which help the frying process.

"I hope next year there's enough interest in the farming community that it may be a viable project," Zappe said about Louisiana-grown Atlantic white potatoes.