FARMER SEEING CASH FROM CUCUMBER CROP

Slicing up profits

Claire Taylor
c.taylor@theadvertiser.com

YOUNGSVILLE — That juicy pickle on your favorite fast-food burger is probably made from cucumbers grown by Ralph Menard of Youngsville, the largest commercial producer of cucumbers in Louisiana.

Menard grows about 2 million pounds of cucumbers a year, but they aren't available at the local farmers market or in the produce section of the grocery store. He grows the fruit exclusively for Louisiana Chef of St. Martinville, which turns the prickly produce into pickles for national fast-food restaurants.

Menard grew up farming, learning to drive a tractor at age 7; his father and grandfather were farmers; his two brothers are farmers.

In 1997, Menard was farming beans and rice and driving a bread truck when he was approached by Garry Brodhead, the basketball coach at Teurlings Catholic High School, who was farming cucumbers for Louisiana Chef and wanted to hand off the job to someone else.

"I said, 'Cucumbers are Greek to me,' " Menard recalled, but he gave it a shot and succeeded with help from the LSU Agriculture Center, which tests new varieties for disease resistance and better productivity.

Today, Menard plants 200 acres of cucumbers in both the spring and fall in fields off La. 92.

His fall cucumber crop was harvested last week. Around March 15, or when the soil temperature reaches 60 degrees Fahrenheit, Menard will plant the spring crop.

He uses a mixture of seeds provided by Louisiana Chef, which produce a vine and yellow flowers that develop into the Lafayette Classic variety of cucumbers.

Menard hires a beekeeper to bring in 200 hives, one per acre, to pollinate the flowers.

"If they don't cross-pollinate a flower at least three times, it won't bring you a beautiful pickle," Menard said, holding up a small, misshapen cucumber.

As with most farms, much depends on the weather. If it's too rainy, too hot or too windy, the bees won't fly. If they don't fly, they don't pollinate the flowers.

"They're very picky workers," he said.

The cucumber crop is quick to mature, usually in about 45 days.

"It's all about timing, Menard said, slicing open a cucumber to illustrate how he judges the readiness of the crop by how thick the meat is versus the wall of the fruit.

His operation is very mechanized, said Stuart Gauthier, county agent with the LSU Agriculture Center in Lafayette and Vermilion parishes. The cucumbers are harvested with machines operated by Menard and one or two others. Most harvesting operations are more labor-intensive, he said.

If the weather's good, Menard can harvest 20 acres a day. On a wet day, harvesting drops to about 10 acres a day. A machine scoops up the cucumbers and vines, sorting them along the way and splitting out those that are too large or too small. Menard's Labrador retrievers often follow along eating the rejects.

This year's two plantings didn't produce a great harvest, Menard said. The fall crop produced about 60 percent of what was expected. The spring crop was the worst he's ever had because of heavy rainfall, he said.

Jimmy Bulliard, co-owner of Louisiana Chef with his brother Danny, said this area is good for growing cucumbers, "except when you have a lot of hurricanes." An Alabama farmer who supplies cucumbers to the company was hit four times this year by hurricanes, he said.

Menard already is doing his homework to improve next year's crop, chatting online with other farmers who can offer tips and discussing what he may have done right or wrong. Still, some things can't be predicted.

"There's so many variables and we all depend on Mother Nature," he said.

But Menard isn't deterred by the poor harvest this year. Farming is in his blood and he said he loves it.

"There's got to be people to feed the world," he said.

"Water, food — that's a precious commodity."