Sweet potato crop affected by cool spring, summer drought

Adverse weather during the growing season is expected to result in a sweet potato crop about 50 to 60 percent of normal production, according to Dr. Mike Cannon, extension sweet potato specialist with the LSU Agricultural Center.

He explains that this year's crop got off to a late start because of a cool, wet spring that slowed growth in the plant beds. That delayed transplanting about three to four weeks, causing most of the crop to be transplanted in mid to late June and into July. Normally, transplanting is in full swing by mid May and finished by the end of June.

This year close to 50 percent of the crop was transplanted in July. Such late plantings are usually less dependable than the mid-May to mid-June plantings.

The summer drought and high temperatures affected the set of sweet potatoes and slowed the sizing of the crop. Although Beauregard usually is ready to harvest in 90 days, it has taken 120-125 days to size this season. Yields are running from 100 to 200 bushels per acre of graded sweet potatoes, compared to an average of 250 to 350 bushels per acre. The grade is off somewhat, with a large percentage of misshapen roots caused by the drought.

Normally, as harvest begins, the price for fresh sweet potatoes starts high and falls rapidly as the crop begins to be harvested. However, this season the price remained strong longer than normal, which is indicative of the short crop.

The crops in Mississippi and Texas are reported to be similarly affected. The North Carolina crop is reported to be down from last year. North Carolina is the major competition for the Louisiana crop.

The Beauregard variety, developed by the LSU Agricultural Center, remains the envy of growers and shippers in other sweet potato-producing states. "Louisiana Beauregard" has become the established name in the fresh marketing channels and buyers are asking for them, Cannon reports.

Virtually all of the Louisiana crop is planted to Beauregard. Texas, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia have been fairly successful with Beauregard; North Carolina has been less successful, mainly because of a different soil type.

"Some sweet potato brokers have apparently tried to sell Beauregards from other states as "Louisiana Beauregards" to take advantage of the popularity of the Louisiana variety," Cannon notes. "This could have an adverse effect on the marketing of Beauregards from Louisiana since the same high-quality standards for grade are not met by other states."

Sweet potatoes purchased now are not as sweet as they will be later. They usually reach their peak in sugar development seven to eight weeks after harvest. They are known as "cured" or "Kiln dried" sweet potatoes. Cured or kiln dried sweet potatoes usually begin to reach the grocery stores around Thanksgiving.

If purchased sweet potatoes don't seem sweet enough when they are baked, then they can be candied, fried or stored a few weeks to allow the sugar content to increase more, Cannon advises. Sweet potatoes should never be refrigerated, he adds.

Sweet potatoes are an excellent source of beta carotene, a precursor to vitamin A, in the diet.