

UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Catnip

Introduction

Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*) is a perennial herb in the mint family. Most often thought of as a stimulant for cats, catnip also has a number of properties beneficial to humans. Once used as a folk remedy for a wide variety of medical problems, today its essential oils are used in a number of pharmaceutical products. Leaves and stems are used in herbal tea mixtures and as flavorings in foods. Researchers have also found that catnip contains a chemical that is highly effective as a natural mosquito repellent.

Marketing

Catnip is marketed for cats in stuffed toys, catnip filled balls, compressed pellets, and in shaker bottles. Most commercial catnip for toys is of a lower grade, consisting of dried, ground-up stalks, as well as leaves. However, the most aromatic portions of the plant are the blossoms and leaves. Strong marketing skills are essential for success with a niche product like catnip. Savvy growers may be able to develop a market for a higher grade product, especially if well-packaged to retain freshness, and therefore, potency. Organic growers with an existing consumer base that prefers organic goods may also have a distinct marketing advantage. Marketing possibilities include farmers markets, pet stores, and higher-end retail stores. Growers should have an established market available before beginning production.

Market Outlook

Wholesale markets for herbs are difficult to crack into. Potential



producers would need to have a marketing agreement in line before producing large amounts of a thinly traded crop like catnip for wholesale. Producers with creativity and good marketing skills may be able to capture a niche of the pet supplies market, which comprises about 20 percent of the more than \$30 billion that U.S. pet owners spend on their animals.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

Catnip prefers sites with full sun, well-drained soil, and adequate moisture. This herb can be seeded and grown in a greenhouse or hotbed until plants are the proper size for transplanting. Catnip is then transplanted to the field mechanically or by hand once all danger of frost has passed. Small seed size, slow germination, and poor ability to compete with weeds makes direct seeding to the field difficult.



Pest management

Catnip has few insect and disease pests. Because catnip is a poor competitor with other plants, weeds are the greatest threat to production. Since there are no herbicides labeled for this crop, hand weeding and cultivation are the main techniques for weed control.

Harvest and storage

Catnip is ready to harvest at full bloom when aromatic properties are at their peak. Stems are cut a few inches above the crown in order to allow for plant regrowth. Plantings can generally be cut twice (mid-summer and fall) during the growing season. Cutting can be accomplished by hand or with a side bar cutter mower. Some growers gather the crop using a standard baler once stems have dried sufficiently. Harvested plants are dried naturally in the shade or with an artificial dryer. Further drying and processing may be required, depending on the buyer and use.

Labor requirements

Labor needs per ¼ acre are approximately 75 hours for production, 64 hours for harvest and 8 hours for processing.

Economic Considerations

A crop to be niche marketed directly to the consumer will demand very low amounts of land and capital, likely less than 1/10 acre and \$1,000 in operating expenses. No amount of any crop should ever be grown without first having a marketing plan prepared.

There is a small wholesale market for catnip. Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of seed, transplant production and plant establishment. Canada is a significant producer for many wholesale herb crops. Based on 2002 projections from British Columbia, two-year production costs for ¼ acre of catnip in the U.S. would be \$500 to \$600, with harvest and marketing costs of \$750 per acre.

Total expenses, including both variable and fixed, would be approximately \$1,300 for ¼ acre over two years. Presuming gross returns of \$1,750, returns to land, capital and management would be approximately \$450 per ¼ acre. Certified organic production could generate two to three times the profit.

More Information

- Selected Internet Resources for Herb Marketing (University of Kentucky, 2005)
<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/herbmarketing.pdf>
- Catnip (Virginia Tech, 2001)
<http://www.sfp.forprod.vt.edu/factsheets/catnip.pdf>
- Certified Organic Versus Non-Organic Budgets for Catnip Herb (British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, 2002)
http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/busmgmt/budgets/budget_pdf/specialty_organic/CatnipWin.pdf
- Production of Catnip in North Carolina (North Carolina State University State, 1997)
<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/proceedings1990/V1-527.html>