UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Sweet Corn

Marketing

Fresh market options for Kentucky-grown sweet corn include wholesale markets, cooperatives, farmers' markets and roadside stands. Selling to supermarkets is also an option.

Market Outlook

Fresh sweet corn consumption has increased 20 percent over the past ten years. Because it is popular and easy to sell, it is often used to draw consumers to a retail outlet. Value-added and premium local marketing will be keys to maintaining future sweet corn profitability.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

Sweet corn will do well in all areas of Kentucky, but well-drained soils are essential for good results. A field that has been in fescue sod is ideal for sweet corn production, but plowing should be done several weeks in advance of planting. In most parts of Kentucky the earliest plantings are made between April 20 and May 1.

Sweet corn cultivars are grouped according to the gene(s) controlling sugar content level: standard type, super sweet, sugar-enhanced, and several other types. Any of these may have white, yellow or bicolor kernels. It is necessary to isolate several of these types from each other to avoid reductions in sugar content and to prevent the production of all bicolor corn due to cross pollination. This can be accomplished by physical separation or by making sure there is a minimum of 14 days difference in the maturities of different types.

Pest management

Corn earworm is one of the most destructive insects attacking sweet corn. Other insect pests that can cause crop damage include corn borer, armyworm, Japanese beetles and flea beetles. Using insect traps or scouting to monitor populations can help the grower determine when and how often insecticides should be applied.

Potential disease problems include Stewart's wilt, leaf blights, rust and viruses. Crop rotation and the use of resistant varieties can help control these diseases. Weed control can be achieved by a good crop rotation program and the use of herbicides. Deer, groundhogs, raccoons and birds can also cause crop losses.

Harvest and storage

Corn should be harvested at the proper stage of maturity for best quality. To maintain top quality, sweet corn must be properly cooled to prevent the sucrose from changing into starch.

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Labor requirements

Labor needs for sweet corn

production are approximately 20 hours per acre. Hand harvesting and packing requires 55 to 65 hours per acre, while machine harvesting and packing requires 20 to 30 hours per acre.

Economic Considerations

Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of seed and installation of an irrigation system. A typical total cost for overhead irrigated, fresh market sweet corn in 2005 was approximately $1,650 per acre. Since returns vary depending on actual yields and market prices, the following per acre returns to land and management estimates are based on three different scenarios. Conservative estimates represent the University of Kentucky's statewide average cost and return estimates for 2005.

Pessimistic	*Conservative*	*Optimistic*
$(9)*	$311	$1,035

Sweet corn profits are extremely sensitive to price. Wholesale sweet corn profits can be especially risky due to lower prices and potential regional surpluses of fresh sweet corn during Kentucky's season.

**Parentheses indicate a negative number, i.e. a net loss*

More Information

- Kentucky Sweet Corn Insect Integrated Pest Management Scout Manual (University of Kentucky, 1994)
http://www.uky.edu/Ag/IPM/manuals/ipm10swt.pdf
- Vegetable and Melon Enterprise Budgets (University of Kentucky, 2004)
http://www.uky.edu/Ag/AGEcon/pubs/software/budgets_veg_melon.html
- Vegetable Production Guide for Commercial Growers ID-36 (University of Kentucky)
http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id36/id36.htm
- Sweet Corn Marketing Fact Sheet (University of Kentucky, 2005)
http://www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/corn2005.pdf
- Organic Sweet Corn Production (ATTRA, 2001)
http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/sweetcorn.html
- Sweet Corn MF-669 (Kansas State University, 1994)
http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/hort2/samplers/MF669.asp