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Oakes Farms forging ahead with expansion and increased programs

March 20, 2017

On the heels of a year that brought amazing growth, expansion and new partnerships in the face of some growing challenges, Immokalee, FL-based Oakes Farms shows no sign of slowing down.

Steve Veneziano, vice president of operations, said March 6 that the company continues to add new growing partners and to expand its commodity list and growing regions.

“Rentz Family Farms in Bainbridge, Georgia, will be partnering with Oakes Farms to grow green squash, yellow squash — both straightneck and crookneck varieties — and Jalapeño peppers this spring,” said Veneziano. “We will be harvesting and packing these items from mid-May to mid-June.”

Oakes Farms will also add Covington variety sweet potatoes and Murasaki Japanese sweet potatoes to its premium Seed to Table lineup.



Oakes Farms' new partnership with Rentz Family Farms includes Covington and Murasaki Japanese sweet potatoes, in addition to other commodities. "With Rentz being a strong quality grower with these items, we are very excited to add these commodities to our lineup," Veneziano said. "We are equally excited to be able to expand and grow our specialty niche program by adding the Murasaki sweet potatoes to our extensive lineup. The Murasaki has a sweet nutty flavor with a fairly dry texture. The sweet potato program will be available year round with Rentz Family Farms."

In order to keep up with its rapid growth and expansion, Oakes Farms took occupancy of its new 16,519-square-foot refrigerated facility located at the Immokalee State Farmers Market on Sept. 1. This is one of six facilities the company now operates in Immokalee, providing cold storage for over 300 trailer loads of product.

In 2016, Oakes Farms announced its new partnership with Chill C Farms in Moultrie, GA, a year-round supplier that will provide upward of 30 commodities initially, and ultimately about 60 items.

In early September it further announced that it had partnered with Tucker Family Farms in Tifton, GA, which is producing eggplant, Bell peppers, and Jalapeño, Cubanelle and Poblano peppers for the fall 2016 season, with expectations of adding cucumbers and grape tomatoes for the spring 2017 crop.

The company also partners with D'Ottavio Produce in Vineland, NJ, for its seasonal crops.

Veneziano said the Florida growing season has been challenging so far this year.

"We're seeing weak markets on most commodities, and we had some heavy wind damage in February," he said. "We are looking forward to being in very strong volumes on all commodities from mid-March through the tail end of May in Immokalee."

He added that Oakes Farms is ramping up strongly with heavy volumes of squashes, eggplant, grape tomatoes and specialty peppers.

"Now, in early March, the plants are looking stellar, and many of our clients are taking advantage of promotions thru mid-May," said Veneziano. "Meanwhile, Oakes Farms growing partner Chill C Farms has just begun planting their Bell peppers, specialty peppers and specialty eggplants. We are really hyped about moving forward with our second year with Chill C."

"We have expanded our cooler and added two new forced-air cooling stations during the past winter that are ready to go," said Chill C co-partner Sam Watson.

Despite its ongoing rapid growth, Veneziano noted that Oakes Farms and its partners all agree that quality and service must never be secondary.

“With multiple warehouses that have state-of-the-art pre-cooling, and new packinglines, we will be able to better serve our customers now and into the future by producing the best produce the South has to offer,” said Veneziano.

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