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Bland Farms enjoying Georgia's changing landscape

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When Delbert Bland, president and owner of Glennville, GA-based Bland Farms, looks at the produce landscape in Georgia, he sees a major transformation that has happened over the last five years.

"It's changed drastically and it seems like more produce is being featured out of this area now," he said. "I know ourselves, we have increased our line from the traditional Vidalia sweet onions to sweet potatoes, and that's done very well for us."

Speaking of sweet potatoes, the company is expecting to grow about 2,000 acres this year after being at 1,200 last year and 600 the year before.

"We feel it's our infrastructure and our people that have helped us be a success in the area," Bland said. "Our team has always worked to produce the highest quality Vidalia onions we can ship, and our people are trained to do that. Naturally, when you go into another commodity, you can adapt to the new crop with the personnel you have in place, and it's been a smooth transition for us."

The company has experienced some subtle changes in the growing side of the business, but for the most part, it has kept the operations running as it always has — planting by hand, harvesting by hand and using overhead irrigation.

"We are doing a little bit of different techniques on plowing onions up, but nothing earth-shattering," Bland said. "When you grow naturally, the biggest thing is how good Mother Nature treats you, and we have seen excellent weather so far this season."

As of the third week of April, Bland Farms was approximately 30 percent into its onion harvest in Georgia and is happy about the projected weather forecast in the weeks ahead.

“We are pretty excited about this crop because it’s come in about two weeks earlier, so we can cure and harvest these onions before it gets extremely hot as it does in the latter part of May,” Bland said. “Also in the latter part of May, it’s more difficult because of the afternoon showers and there’s a lot of humidity and damage from leaving onions in the field.”

The weather wasn’t detrimental last year, but business was more average than anything, and Bland expects 2017 to be much better.

One thing the company has done differently this year with sweet potatoes is that it has planted part of its seed beds in the southern part of Florida, so it already has a couple hundred acres in Georgia because it has brought those slips to help them be ahead of schedule. That means cured sweet potatoes will be available from Georgia by mid-July, earlier than past years.

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