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North Carolina sweet potatoes have a bright future

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If North Carolina is king when it comes to sweet potatoes, then Kelly Precythe has a special throne in the kingdom as he watches over a third-generation operation deep in the heart of the Tar Heel State.

The president of Southern Produce Distributors, Precythe, is a lone entrepreneur when it comes to the company, which handles about 13,000 acres of mostly Covington variety annually, in Faison, NC.

“This year is a really good year for production so far,” he told *The Produce News* recently as he was traveling south to Florida to meet with customers.

“The production and the quality are better than I have ever seen at this point,” he added.



Garret Godwin and Cody Hope of Southern Produce.

The Faison, NC-based company grows and handles a wide variety of sweet potatoes and peppers. Other varieties either grown or handled by Southern Produce include Bonita, Madagascar and White Flesh (good for soups), he said, which all cater to a better looking and sweeter potato than the Covington.

“The foodservice industry is really taking a lot of sweet potatoes and chefs are developing all kinds of new uses,” he said.

He continued, “We are a very large grower and we are seeing the sweet potato production this year about the same. We haven’t really increased but we haven’t decreased either. Sweet potato consumption continues to climb every year.”

North Carolina production numbers from 2015 to 2016 are up almost 21 percent overall, according to the USDA National Agricultural Statistics planting report, with 87,000 acres produced in 2015 and 105,000 acres last year.

North Carolina grows about 53 percent of all the sweet potatoes in the United States.

Hands-on businessman

Precythe is very hands-on with the business dealings of his company, traveling a great deal, even overseas to Spain and Egypt to check out any developments and potential customers.

Southern Produce exports 25-30 percent of its sweet potatoes. Precythe stressed, however, that his absolute focus is on the North Carolina sweet potato and the South’s market development, refining the success of the potato on home ground for domestic distribution.

He praised his employees — key to the company’s success, he said.

“We have a good team of people,” he added. “It’s a young team and progressive.”

The company is putting in an additional eight-lane packaging line, which should be up and running in late October, and Precythe sees the company as continuing to strengthen its leadership position in worldwide sweet potato production and distribution.

The company has also dipped into the organic market with white sweet potatoes, he said.

Precythe’s vision for the beloved North Carolina crop is strong.

“The future of the sweet potato is unending because of the health benefits and especially because of the taste of a North Carolina sweet potato,” he said. “I more than love sweet potatoes. We eat them at home all the time.”

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