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**Sweet potatoes are a top crop for J. Roland Wood Farms**

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By

Keith Loria

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Sweet potatoes are the No. 1 crop at [J. Roland Wood Farms](#), and has been for decades.

“My grandparents started growing sweet potatoes in the late 60s and began packing them in 1979,” said Taylor Rhodes Hill, sales and marketing manager at the Benson, NC-based company. “Back then, my grandparents, Roland and Winifred Wood, only packed sweet potatoes from September to May, reserving the summer months for tobacco. Now 40-something years later, we are packing sweet potatoes year-round. That is thanks to innovation but also the successful legacy my grandparents started in the 60s.”

J. Roland Wood Farms grows around 1,500 acres of sweet potatoes and this year’s crop size will stay similar to last year despite some challenges.

“We took a risk, but seeing the overall decline in acreage from the industry, it was a risk worth taking,” Hill said. “My grandmother always said our success came from the family dynamic of our operation. That is still true to this day, even after her passing in 2019. My grandfather is still owner and president of the company.”

Michael Wood, son of Roland and Winifred, serves as the farm manager. Suzanne Rhodes, their daughter, serves as office manager. The third generation has been stepping in to learn about the operation and take on new roles in aiding in the company’s legacy.

“The 2022 crop fared well compared to past years,” Hill said. “An unprecedented end season occurred for the entire industry, causing increasing prices with the low supply for this time of year. We responded well to the shift in the market, holding onto crop so we could have an easy transition into this 2023 crop. The price held up good and we anticipate the increased prices to shift into the new crop.”

The company began harvest Labor Day weekend and have been seeing a good crop so far.

“With the lack of rain this summer, the crop is looking a bit small, but as we make our way into busy harvest times, we are hoping these few rain showers here and there will size up the crop to give us a more diverse range of sizes,” Hill said. “It is going to be interesting to see how it pans out the next two months for the entire North Carolina sweet potato industry.”

J. Roland Wood Farms has a variety of customers in retail and wholesale and prides itself on the fact that many relationships with customers have lasted more than 30 years.

“The same customers who spoke to my grandmother in the 90s are the ones I am developing relationships with now in this decade,” Hill said. “Our brands are strong in the sweet potato industry

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— Suzy Supreme No.1s, Little Mike No.1s and Big Daddy Jumbos being a sought after label over the years. Developing the market for these brands/labels with our customers is something I believe is our reasoning for strong partnerships.”

One of the ways Hill believes retailers can increase sales of North Carolina sweet potatoes is through consistent marketing of them being a unique super food.

“Often times, consumers assume that sweet potatoes are just another potato like Russets or Yukons,” Hill said. “While those crops are strong and unique on their own, they differ from sweet potatoes greatly. At the botanical level, they classify as two completely different species. The health factors are also something that differ. Sweet potatoes contain beta-carotene, the reason sweet potatoes are that beautiful orange flesh; beta-carotene converts into vitamin A when consumed giving our bodies an array of benefits. Retailers have a key advantage of marketing a vegetable that tastes delicious, is versatile in the kitchen, but also very healthy.”

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## About Keith Loria |

A graduate of the University of Miami, Keith Loria is a D.C.-based award-winning journalist who has been writing for major publications for close to 20 years on topics as diverse as real estate, food and sports. He started his career with the Associated Press and has held high editorial positions at magazines aimed at healthcare, sports and technology. When not busy writing, he can be found enjoying time with his wife, Patricia, and two daughters, Jordan and Cassidy.

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