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Potato growers hail Red River Valley as ideal growing region

By

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The Red River Valley is the largest producer of red potatoes in the nation and the area's yellow potato crop is quickly increasing, as production has grown more than 15 percent in the last 10 years, representing nearly 30 percent of the segment, according to Northland Potatoes.

Between the open plains of North Dakota and the forested lake country of northern Minnesota, the Red River Valley is one of the most fertile farming regions in the world thanks to its nutrient-rich black earth, watered by prairie rains instead of irrigation, making it ideal for potato farmers.

That's why anyone who works in the region can proudly say that the Red River Valley produces the best potatoes year after year.

It's also one of the earliest places in the U.S. that potatoes were planted, as some of the earliest potatoes were planted near Pembina, ND during the 19th century and farmers have been perfecting potato growing ever since.

This year, across the Northern Plains Region, potatoes are grown on nearly 72,000 acres in North Dakota and 8,800 acres in Minnesota.

Over the past decade, there has been a number of innovations improving things in the Red River Valley, as growers work to overcome some of the challenges that the potato industry has faced in recent years, including labor issues, higher costs and weather challenges.

NoKota Packers Inc., which exclusively packs potatoes from its approximately 2,500 acres in Buxton, ND, believes working in the Red River Valley adds to its success thanks to all it offers.

"Many people who have moved on—some even states away — still return to purchase potatoes whenever they are in the area," said Carissa Olsen, president and CEO of the Buxton, ND-based company. "The people in the Red River Valley know a good thing when they see — and taste it."

At retail, Olsen thinks promoting red or yellow potatoes at the store level is still a huge draw for customers.

"We need to see more front page ads, bigger displays, display locations and more in-store promotions," she said. "Ads and displays will drive sales regardless of pricing."

The Red River Valley is the bottom of what was once Lake Agassiz, a massive glacial lake larger than even the mighty Great Lakes. As the huge glacier plowed over the land, it deposited a layer of silt, clay, sand and rock that slowly transformed into the valley's rich soil, setting the area up to become one of the world's most successful farming regions.

As the only grower-owned cooperative in the Red River Valley, Associated Potato Growers Inc., is the largest volume shipper of potatoes in the area, with 17 North Dakota and Minnesota farmers under its umbrella. The Grand Forks, ND-based company credits its strong potato production to the outstanding farmers and the incredible land they get to work on year after year.

O.C. Schulz & Sons Inc., a family owned and operated business which has been growing potatoes in the Red River Valley for more than 50 years, understands that the potatoes coming from the ground are different from those growing elsewhere in the country.

“It is all about the soil,” said David Moquist, a partner in the Crystal, ND-based company. “It gives good red color with clear skin. And yellows generally have bright clear skin as well.”

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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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