



## **Asian vegetables and sweet corn: The Potato Capital of Florida grows a lot more than potatoes these days**

By Travis Gibson  
October 19, 2018

For more than 50 years, Bryan Jones and his family have been growing potatoes that eventually end up as Frito-Lay potato chips.

But in recent years, Jones, who works for his father at Riverdale Potato Farm in St. Johns County, has started to diversify. He has experimented with growing carrots and four years ago introduced green beans into the crop rotation. There are currently 100 acres of green beans growing on a farm not too far from the St. Johns River. He expects them to be ready to harvest just in time for Thanksgiving.

The Jones family, like many St. Johns County farmers in the sparsely populated area west of Interstate 95, has been forced to think outside of the county's traditional crops like potatoes and cabbage as production costs increase and changes in consumer demands shift.

"If you don't adapt and change with technology and the needs of the consumer, you are going to get left," Jones said.

Potatoes still reign supreme in the area known as the "Potato Capital of Florida," but there are some new crops in town ready to make an impact on a booming industry.

### **What grows in St. Johns County?**

According to a 2016 study from the University of Florida, agricultural and related industries in St. Johns County generate \$1.43 billion in gross regional product and account for more than 25,000 full- and part-time jobs.

"Ag is a big deal, but there is a big dividing line that people don't know about us out here," said Jones, who also acts as the president of the Putnam and St. Johns County Farm Bureau. "There is a lot of really cool things we do out here."

The average St. Johns County resident also doesn't know what is being grown right in their backyard, Jones said.

Farmers in the area are growing a diverse group of crops including spinach, cauliflower, kale, carrots, cantaloupe, watermelon and sweet corn. Broccoli has become one of the most popular alternative crops among farmers in recent years. There are also large timber and hay operations in the county.

Bucky Sykes, owner of Sykes Family Farm in Elkton, a farm known for its fall crop maze, quit growing potatoes in the early 2000s. Today, Sykes and Wells Brothers Farm are part of a group of farmers who have started growing Asian vegetables. There are currently around 4,000 acres of Asian vegetables being grown in St. Johns County which includes crops like bok choy, Chinese cabbage, mustard greens and daikon radishes.

Behind some of the recent agricultural innovation is the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, an important resource for those looking to try something different.

### **IFAS experiments**

Gary England, director at the UF/IFAS Hastings AG Extension Center, walked between rows of sweet corn Thursday and admired the progress. After a challenging fall, the corn was ready for harvest.

“We are looking at sweet corn as a potential alternative crop in St. Johns County,” England said. “Our advisory committees and support from the county has indicated that’s the type of things we need to look at to help the overall marketing and profitability for our growers.”

The goal of UF/IFAS in Hastings is to conduct research and experiments on crops and potential crops on its 50-acre facility in east Hastings and pass that data along to farmers in the tri-county area which includes St. Johns County, Putnam County and Flagler County.

Sweet corn, the kind used for corn on the cob, is one of the recent experiments. Once a popular crop in the Hastings area, England said it could be poised to make a comeback.

A few hundred yards from the small cornfield, another experiment is in progress.

“We are planting cauliflower and Brussels sprouts,” England said. “The acreage [for cauliflower] has grown quite a bit rather quickly in the Hastings area so we are working on fertilizer and variety trials to see if we can help find out a good combination to enhance that profit.”

The group is also working to try to figure out how to grow potatoes using less water. Next month, England and his team will be planting artichokes.

“St. Johns County recognizes the value of the ag industry here,” England said. “This is an historical area. A hundred years ago, the rest of the state was just swampland and woods and there was commercial ag in this area.”

### **The future**

Jones said the relationship between farmers and UF/IFAS hasn’t always been perfect, but lately it has been positive.

"We are excited," Jones said. "[UF/IFAS] is doing a lot of things to help us. But it is going to take continued investment, research, effort and grower knowledge. If everyone can come together to help our area grow, then we are all going to benefit."

England is hopeful that will happen and envisions a future that includes a much wider range of crops in St. Johns County.

"There are a bunch of people moving into this area every day and they have got to eat something," England said.

Jones and England said recent changes in federal trucking laws that require most long-distance truckers to use electronic logging devices to keep track of their time spent driving could open up the East Coast market for Florida farmers.

England gave an example.

"California is by far the main part of the broccoli industry, but it's getting tougher and more expensive for trucks to ship things east," England said. "People don't want two-week-old stuff. The broccoli we grow here, in two days it could be in Boston."

With those factors in mind, Jones is already thinking about his next move.

"I am thinking about planting quinoa next summer," Jones said.