

Deesa farmers reap 'healthy' potato harvest

Experiment with new red variety that has low sugar content; a hit with food chains

Prashant Dayal | TNN

Ahmedabad: French fries and wedges are irresistible. And now eating them may not take you on a guilt trip. Some farmers of Palanpur in north Gujarat have started growing a variety of potatoes that have low sugar content than the conventional ones.

Deesa is already famous for producing king-size potatoes that have many takers in multi-national companies. This region supplies 40 per cent of the country's total potato production. In the last two years, some farmers in Deesa taluka of Palanpur began experimenting with a new variety of potatoes getting its name from its red outer skin.



P.J. Chaudhary with his latest harvest

Scientists from Dantiwada Agriculture University were present when the red potato's seeds were first sown by farmers. The scientists had raised doubts over success of this crop because this type of potato is usually found in mountainous terrain. However, farmers went ahead with their experiment. And, it paid off. For the last two years, they are reaping rich dividends from this new variety.

Shyamal Chaudhary, a farmer of Banaskantha, said, "When we took up this experiment, there were many detractors. But, our success shut them up and we are increasing production every year." The potato found takers among potato chips and wafer producing companies. Testing the potato in their laboratories, the companies found that not only did these potatoes have less water content — which is ideal for wafers — but they were also low on sugar.

This potato is a little expensive than the conventional one. "Farmers sell it for Rs 9 per kg, instead of the Rs 6 per kg of conventional variety. This is the wholesale rate given to companies like Balaji, ITC, Gurgaon and Pepsico," said P.J. Chaudhary, a Deesa-based farmer.



Long-term effects difficult to gauge

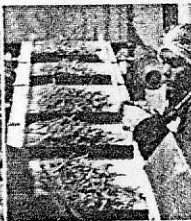
"Non-reducing sugars are negligible and reducing sugar level is less in these potatoes. But long-term health effects are difficult to gauge for now," said professor Himanshu Pandya of department of Botany, Gujarat University. "This variety contains more starch. Conventional potato contains 1.97 units of starch while red potato has 3.08 units. This could be counter productive. Gujaratis don't need starch as much since there is less of physical exercise."

DIET POTATOES?

TOI got the potatoes tested in Gujarat University's botany department. And, the results were quite startling. They clearly showed that the red potato had much less sugar content than conventional variety

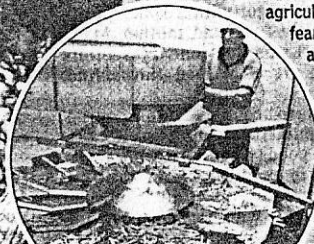
Comparison of sugar level in a potato of each variety

	Reducing	Non-reducing
Conventional	0.481	0.279
Red Potato	0.370	0.187



New irrigation method led to boom

Sprinkler and drip irrigation is the new motto in Deesa. With a spectre of drought and low rainfall looming large, this method of farming has made the agriculturists of Deesa fearless. With the state and Central government also giving on-spot subsidy to those farmers wanting to purchase sprinklers, this scientific way of farming is fast catching on.



Vice-president (agriculture) of McCain, Ghislain Pellier, had come to India in 1998. He had noted that the potato quality and size was good but due to lot of wastage of water, groundwater level was dropping and overhead costs were high. He then coined a slogan — every drop counts. Soon afterwards, McCain officials taught farmers to use drip irrigation and sprinkler as more effective ways of watering crops, than the conventional method.

Devendra Kumar, general manager (agriculture) said, "For instance, one kg potato required 300 litres of water for cultivation. Since sprinkler and drip irrigation was accepted, only 125 litres of water is required for the purpose. This is optimal use of resources. At McCain factory in Mehsana, rainwater harvesting ensures that whatever water is consumed by the factory in processing the potatoes is also recharged."

They sing Alleluiah to the Aloo

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Ahmedabad: Jethabhai Chaudhary, 80, a farmer of Deesa, drives a white SUV to Ahmedabad and to the market yard to conduct business. In the evenings, he likes to get back to the comfort of his bungalow and settle down watching his favourite programmes on satellite television.

In 2005, he was a mediocre farmer cultivating potatoes on 4 acres of land. Today, he grows them in over 42 acres of land. This year, he filed income tax returns of Rs 62 lakh. "I never thought I will drive a Scorpio. A tractor was all that I had earlier," he told TOI. He owes his lifestyle to the king-size tuber crop he produces in this part of the state.

Phulchand Mali, a farmer of Deesa, too has a similar story to tell. He had a lot of land but no knowledge of scientific farming. In 2004, just before McCain Foods (India) Private Limited officials came to Deesa, Mali used to produce potatoes in a 15-acre plot. McCain officers taught him and other farmers the nuances of drip irrigation, use of sprinklers and right dosage of fertilizers to optimize crop production.

The first crop produce proved to be a catalyst towards social and economic transformation. Not only were the potatoes larger in size but water usage had been minimal and overall expenses also decreased. The increase in profit margin continued.

Today, Mali cultivates potatoes in 200 acres of land. "McCain taught us



Jethabhai Chaudhary

this new way of farming and changed our lifestyle forever," said Mali. And, this tale of success and prosperity was experienced by many other farmers. In 2005-06, potato farming was spread over 16,500 acres of Palanpur district. Potato production then used to be 4.7 lakh tonnes. In 2007-08, the cultivation grew to 33,400 acres and production touched 10 lakh tonnes. All over Gujarat, potatoes are grown on 65,213 acres of land with an annual production of 18.89 lakh tonnes.

Parag Patel, another farmer said, "Earlier potato production in my 190-acre land was 10 to 11 tonnes per acre. The sprinkler method ensured that it jumped to 15-17 tonnes per acre. In some cases the production has touched a high of 22 tonnes."

General manager (plant), McCain Foods (India) Private Limited, Rajeev Chauhan, which supplies French fries to many countries in India and Asia says, "In 2006, we purchased 5,000 tonnes of potatoes from Deesa farmers. In 2009, our purchase figure will touch 25,000 tonnes."