

US shiitake market mushrooming

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Shiitake mushrooms are the third most popular mushroom species in the U.S. In addition to taste, shiitake have a multitude of health benefits. Low in calories, glucose and sodium, shiitake are high in potassium, phosphorus, copper, and zinc.

Beyond those positive nutritional factors, shiitake also contain elements that lower blood cholesterol and improve the immune system. It's no wonder that demand is increasing for these nutritional powerhouses.

Native to Asian forests, shiitake are cultivated in two ways in the United States. The first takes place in forests, often applying an agroforestry technique known as forest farming, in which the forest canopy is altered to provide the appropriate amount of shade to grow crops below. The mushrooms grow on hardwood logs. This method results in a higher-quality product with minimal capital investment. The disadvantages of this method are weather dependence, seasonal production with lower yields, longer production cycles, and a heavier workload.

Shiitake can also be cultivated indoors, grown on logs or blocks of sawdust in environmentally controlled buildings. The distinct advantage of this process is the ability to produce shiitake year-round with shorter production cycles and higher yields. The downside to indoor cultivation is increased cost and a lower-quality product.

Michael A. Gold, Mihaela M. Cernusca, and Larry D. Godsey from the University of Missouri surveyed 104 shiitake producers throughout the U.S. to learn about production and marketing in the field, and published

the results of their study in the American Society for Horticultural Science journal *HortTechnology*.

According to the report based on 36 survey responses, 40% of shiitake growers had been in business less than 5 years, and only 17% had been growing for 20 or more years. The growers cited low start-up costs and the existence of potential markets as reasons for choosing this business. They chose shiitake because of their nutritional benefits as well as being an environmentally friendly crop. Eighty-eight percent of the growers who responded produced organically, while 40% were certified organic by the USDA.

However, respondents considered growing shiitake mushrooms to be labor-intensive, especially since it takes a full year to reach the point of harvest. Some of the producers felt that the income was not high enough compared to the time invested. A general lack of production and marketing information and the lack of dependable labor were cited as reasons some would not choose to grow shiitake again.

The study found that 75% of the survey respondents sold shiitake to restaurants, 69% sold to farmers markets, and 61% sold through on-farm outlets. Wholesale prices reported by respondents were between \$5 and \$7 per pound.

Nearly 40% of respondents noted an increase in demand over the past 5 years, and more than 40% expected an additional increase in demand for log-grown shiitake in the next 5 years. "Importantly, no respondent believed that demand will decrease over the next 5 years", the study authors concluded.

The complete study is available on the ASHS HortTechnology electronic journal web site: horttech.ashspublications.org/...nt/abstract/18/3/489

Source: American Society for Horticultural Science

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