

NM farmers work to preserve native chile varieties

May 11 2009, By MELANIE DABOVICH , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Gene Lopez has just finished planting his chile field in the same way he's planted his heat-packed crop for three decades. But as the years pass, there seems to be more immediacy behind each seed he places in the ground.

The 70-year-old retired employee of Los Alamos National Laboratory is not a typical chile farmer. He works his small field in the tiny village of Lyden not for profit but to preserve a cultural and gastronomical treasure passed down for generations: native northern New Mexico chile.

Farmers, researchers and advocates worry that native chile lines could vanish forever, taking with them invaluable plant genetics and the cultural heritage of an entire region.

As farmland becomes covered with homes and younger generations abandon farming, Lopez is unsure who will preserve the tradition of growing the native chile crops that have sprouted in the area for more than three centuries.

"No one in my family wants to keep up the farming. I don't know who's going to keep the tradition up," he said. "The number of farmers around here is decreasing and people are coming in with trailers. The farmland is going away."

Charles Martin, assistant professor at New Mexico State University's Sustainable Agriculture Science Center, holds workshops for growers to

help traditional chile farmers preserve their crops and compete with the larger elements of the industry.

"These traditional lines and crop biodiversity is rapidly being lost," Martin said. "The farmers themselves are not even aware of the value of maintaining their traditional lines. They believe their crops are inferior because they're small and they don't have the yield of modern varieties."

Preserving native chile is important to maintain genetic biodiversity, he said. Native chile lines are more disease-resistant and have been adapted to grow without fertilizers, he said.

"Native chile lines are often the parent material from which modern plant breeders rely upon to create new varieties. It is in everyone's interest to maintain these crop lines," Martin said. "Chile production has been a part of the traditional and sustainable level of [agriculture](#) in this area for generations."

Often when people think of New Mexico's signature crop, their images are of the sunny southern part of the state where acres of chile pods ripen in the hot sun on large, commercial farms.

In northern New Mexico, small farmers grow native chile varieties that have been passed down within families for hundreds of years and selected according to individual family tastes. The lines are unique to where they're grown and are named after those areas - including about a dozen varieties such as Chimayo, Velarde, Dixon, said Paul Bosland, professor of horticulture and director of the Chile Pepper Institute at NMSU in Las Cruces.

Native chile has grown in popularity in the artisanal chile and specialty foods market and is sought out by gourmet restaurants. Aficionados claim it has a richer flavor than modern commercial varieties.

Because native chile acreage is quite small - less than 2 acres per farm - farmers get premium prices.

JoAnn Casados, owner of JoAnn's Restaurant in Espanola, serves both native and commercial chile. She says she's willing to pay more for native chile because "the taste is so much different" in dishes such as enchiladas and tamales.

"It's the flavor. You ask the old timers here in the valley, and they know if it's not native chile. There's a bigger demand for it but people aren't growing it," she said.

Lois Stanford, an associate anthropology professor at NMSU, said the disappearing native chile lines means the area's historical farming community loses a sense of culture and identity.

"There are a lot of practices that go with the conservation of those varieties, such as stories and legends and history and memories. There's seeds that have been passed down and seeds that have been extracted," she said. "It's the cultural heritage of food, and all that is lost if you're buying your seeds from the Wal-Mart seed section."

In an effort to keep native chile viable, the Native Hispanic Institute's Chimayo Chile Project is working to increase awareness and urge more northern New Mexico farmers to grow it.

About 50 farmers in the project work with each other to promote their product and to assure their precious seeds will be preserved for future generations, said Marie Pilar Campos, president of NHI in Santa Fe.

Campos said the project is looking for funding to create an apprenticeship program for youth to work side-by-side with older farmers.

"These senior citizens are passing away, and they take all that cultural knowledge," she said.

Lopez hopes this year's crop will be a good one to sell at nearby farmer's markets.

"I've been growing this chile all my life. We like it and we want to keep it in the family. I don't ever want to lose that seed," Lopez said. "Once I go to the next world, I don't know who will plant it, but the seed will still be here."

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