

Rains wreak havoc on South Texas onion crop

April 20 2012, By R. Santaana



Arin Bauer, left, and Ashley Gregory, assistants to Dr. Juan Anciso, gather data for an onion field trial at the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center at Weslaco. Credit: AgriLife Communications photo by Rod Santa Ana

The late March storm that pelted McAllen with hail and most of the Lower Rio Grande Valley with rain also turned the area's onion crop on its head, according to a Texas AgriLife Extension Service expert.

“Fields that were green turned brown almost overnight after the rains,” said Dr. Juan Anciso, vegetable specialist at the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center at Weslaco.

Since 1995, for some unexplained reason, rains have wreaked havoc on onion fields, leading to a condition Anciso refers to as blight.

“We’re not sure about the root cause, but for the past 17 years or so, rains cause blighting,” he said. “Two or three days after a [rain](#), the mixture of fungus and bacteria just becomes uncontrollable and foliage dies. Insect thrips populations and damage also increase dramatically, especially if they weren’t treated early on. They just get out of hand.”

If fields stay dry as they did last year, blight is not seen at all, Anciso added.

“This year, the late March rains were Valley-wide and nobody was immune,” he said. “Before the rains, fields were doing great; disease and insects were under control. But after the rains, the treated fields looked as bad as those that had been ignored.”

The South Texas onion harvest of about 7,300 acres began in mid-March, about two weeks before the rains, and despite the blight, will likely continue through mid-May, Anciso said.

Acreage was down from 10,000 acres planted last year due to low market prices.

“Prices were so low last year a lot of growers lost their shirts,” he said. “So, this year they scaled back because there was no indication prices would improve dramatically.”

As it turns out, prices this year are slightly higher than average.

“Fifty-pound bags of yellow onions are fetching an average of \$10,” he said. “That’s better than the \$5 to \$6 growers got last year, which only returned their investment.”

Anciso estimates 85 percent of this year’s crop is made up of yellow onions. Growers who planted white and red onions are doing much

better, Anciso said.

“Fifty-pound bags of white onions and 25-pound bags of red onions are getting between \$16 and \$20, which is above average. Last year they only got \$12, getting growers only \$2 to \$3 profit per bag. This year they’ll get about a \$6 profit on approximately 500 bags per acre.”

South Texas onions traditionally are sold in Texas and throughout the Midwest, and as far north as New York and Ontario, he said.

“None of this onion blight is harmful to human health,” Anciso concluded, “but the quality of the onions is affected by blight. They just won’t last on the shelf as they normally would.”

Provided by Texas A&M AgriLife

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