

Specialty Potato Production and Marketing in Southern Idaho

Nora Olsen, Jo Ann Robbins, Tina Brandt, Rhea Lanting, Joan Parr, Cammie Jayo, and Christi Falen

Introduction

Consumer acceptance of specialty, gourmet, or premium potatoes has been increasing during the last several years. Specialty potatoes tend to be unique and non-traditional cultivars of high quality, various colors, texture, and sizes. These specialty potato cultivars can be red outside and pink inside (Huckleberry and All Red), blue on the inside and out (All Blue), yellow fleshed and skinned (German Butterball and Yukon Gold) and other colorful variations (Fig. 1). Many of the blue or red fleshed cultivars are also high in antioxidants providing an additional nutritional benefit making these types of cultivars even more appealing to consumers. Specialty potatoes comprise only a small percentage (1 versus 70 percent for russets) of the total fresh potatoes consumed and, therefore, lend themselves to small acreage production and direct marketing. Specialty potatoes usually command a higher price, so potato size, quality, and packaging must meet consumer expectations.



Fig.1. Examples of internal and external color of specialty potatoes.

What customers want

The United States Potato Board (USPB) has done extensive consumer surveys indicating that the majority of consumers are willing to pay a higher price for quality fresh potatoes. In fact, 57.2 percent of consumers surveyed by USPB specified quality, appearance, and color as the primary considerations when purchasing potatoes. Only 18.2 percent indicated that price was most important for russets.

Surveys from the USPB also indicate that consumers typically want more information, such as potato type or cultivar and cooking or usage suggestions, when purchasing potatoes. Consumers are

This bulletin outlines a series of projects conducted in southcentral Idaho to evaluate production characteristics of specialty potatoes, consumer preference, and the utilization of one method to alter potato size profile. The cultivars evaluated in these trials and surveys were Caribe (lavender purple skin/white flesh), Epicure (buff white skin/white flesh), German Butterball and Yukon

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types of media, such as cooking magazines, restaurant experiences, television cooking shows, and cookbooks, about the numerous unique potato cultivars available. The information provided in this bulletin is intended to help consumers make informed choices when purchasing specialty potatoes.

Huckleberry (red skin/pink flesh), and NorDonna and Viking Red (red skin/white flesh). Russet Norkotah (russet skin/white flesh) was used as a standard. The cultivars selected are just a

higher when seed was aged. Although seed aging significantly increased stem numbers for Yukon Gold, there was no impact on total yield or tuber size distribution. In general, seed aging using these elevated storage temperatures did not substantially impact size distribution for these cultivars. More extreme seed storage temperatures may be needed in order to make substantial changes in tuber size distribution. Other means to alter size such as seedpiece size, plant spacing and earlier harvests may need to be utilized in conjunction with seed aging.

Summary

Information in this bulletin may be used as a reference for producing and marketing specialty potatoes. Specific production programs and marketing plans are needed on an individual basis. Current markets for these specialty potatoes are available, but on a limited scale. Therefore, caution should be used in initial production volume. Whether direct marketing or wholesaling the potatoes, it is important to have markets and plans established prior to planting.

Sources and considerations for obtaining seed of specialty cultivars

Since specialty potato production is relatively new and rather limited, finding certified and high quality seed can be difficult. The specialty potato market depends greatly on providing premium quality potatoes to the consumers, so it is important to start with high quality seed at planting. If a purchased seed lot has high levels of *Fusarium* dry rot and/or wet rot, once the seed is planted, seed decay and stand establishment can become major issues.

Other concerns include the reduction in yield and tuber quality due to potato leaf roll and mosaic virus infections. These losses can be severe depending upon the situation. Purchase only certified seed and obtain certification reports. If winter tests were performed, obtain results prior to purchasing the seed. Planting high quality certified seed is one of the most important considerations when producing specialty potatoes. Reputable specialty seed potato growers can be found in Idaho, Colorado, and other states, so check with your state's certification agency for a listing of certified growers.

Additional resources

Re-inventing the Potato Retail Marketing Toolkit. 2001. United States Potato Board (<http://www.uspotatoes.com>).

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A few important points to consider from these studies:

- All cultivars performed well in southern Idaho, although some produced higher yields and better quality than others.
- Growth habit and rate of tuber bulking of each cultivar will impact production and harvest timing.
- Culinary uses for particular cultivars will differ and knowledge of best use is important.
- Potatoes with unusual flesh colors (e.g. pink or blue) may have less appeal to consumers than yellow or white fleshed cultivars.
- Yield and size vary with each cultivar; cultural practices can be used

to modify size distribution, although seed aging did not substantially impact size in the cultivars in this study.

- Size and appearance are important consumer criteria and need to be maximized for each cultivar.
- At the present time, in southern Idaho, direct marketing of specialty potatoes to consumers may be more effective than marketing through commercial retail avenues. Marketing potential in large cities (New York, Chicago) should be investigated.
- Having a solid understanding of your consumers and the end-uses of the potatoes purchased will help increase consumer acceptance and demand.

The Authors

Nora Olsen is an extension potato specialist at the University of Idaho, Twin Falls; JoAnn Robbins is an extension educator at the UI in Jerome County; Tina Brandt is a support scientist at the UI in Kimberly; Rhea Lanting is an extension Family and Consumer Science educator at the UI in Twin Falls; Joan Parr is an extension Family and Consumer Science educator at the UI in Cassia County; Cammie Jayo is an extension nutrition program coordinator, Twin Falls County; Christi Falen is a former extension crops educator at the UI in Jerome County.

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