

AGRICULTURAL GUIDE

Published by the University of Missouri-Columbia Extension Division

FEB 17 1984

Sunflowers

Marketing Sunflowers

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In today's market, soybean, palm, sunflower, peanut, and most other plant oils are substituted for one another according to availability and cost. They are substituted even though sunflower oil is slightly lower in cholesterol and has a higher flashpoint and clarity than the other oils.¹ What this highly competitive market means to farmers is that unless they are growing sunflowers under contract to the mill, they are not likely to be paid any premiums for high oil content.

Only in large sunflower-growing areas are premiums paid for additional oil points in the black-seeded varieties (according to the percentage of oil above 40 percent by weight).

The non-oil (confectionary) seeds receive premiums for the percentage of large seed. During harvest, the large empty hulls are not easily separated from the good seed. Foreign matter may range from 3 to 20 percent.

For many years, Europe has been the greatest market for U.S.-grown sunflowers. Only within the past decade have new, domestic uses been found for sunflower seed.

In Missouri, price and market have been very unstable because of the small acreages grown. There is essentially no market in Missouri, unless growers create the tonnage of seed to merit marketing. Usually, growers must sell at a local elevator that has agreed to transport their inventory to a bargehead or an oil mill. Because sunflowers occupy roughly two to three times the space and weight of soybeans, 2 to 3 cents per pound (about 20 percent of the total crop) is discounted for transportation. After the discount, farmers have received a price ranging from 8 to 12 cents per pound.

Sometimes, oil mills seek other seed to crush and

extract to supplement their cotton and soybean processing. However, these mills accept sunflower seeds only before or after the major oil seeds have been processed. This creates a problem, for farmers must decide where and how long to store sunflower seed safely until the mill is ready for it. Long-term storage means that a minimum of 9 percent moisture is required.

To be successful in any region of Missouri, enough acreage has to be in sunflowers to justify a grain dealer assigning storage facilities to sunflowers, and if applicable, filling out the space requirements of barges. Presently, local grain companies cannot handle sunflowers and their marketing. So far, the greatest success has been with hauling sunflowers to Kennett or Kansas City by truck and returning with loads of other materials. But it's critical that such marketing arrangements be defined and planned well in advance of harvest. Decide on a receiving point and approximate price range before planting sunflowers.

In the future, the sunflower market may be more promising. Consumers often select sunoil over the other oils for its light color, clarity, and mild aroma. Also, in urban areas, packaging black sunflower seed for wildlife food into convenient 3- to 5-pound bags has commanded 50 to 80 cents a pound. And several grain elevators have begun to handle bulk sunflower seed for urban users for wildlife food or home use. Some of the other current uses of sunflower seed and hulls in the U.S. are in paint, fireplace logs, fiber board, poultry litter, livestock feed, and pet food additives.

While Missouri will always be able to absorb small quantities of sunflowers in local markets, any large-scale production will require extensive work by seed representatives to arrange a sufficient acreage in a given region of the state. Also, a strong market must be identified with a target price that is competitive with soybeans.

¹Flashpoint refers to heat stability, and clarity refers to color.

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