

Looking back and looking forward

As the 2011 garlic crop stays nestled under a varying blanket of snow, growers met on Saturday Dec 11 for the annual fall meeting. After a year of some of the strongest demand and best prices for our crop, it was an opportunity to look at what happened and what the future will bring.

We had a growing season that had extreme drought in the deep southwest, a lot of heat units everywhere, and more than sufficient rainfall in many areas. We had some scattered and very serious damage due primarily to bulb and stem nematode. Becky Hughes from New Liskeard pointed out that nematode numbers will build up in a cool wet year (2009) and you will always see the damage effect in a hot drier year (the hot being the key). For growers who had an infestation it was devastating. As well there have been growing challenges in China, California and other areas.

Along with rampant inflation in China which has increased the cost of all their produce and thankfully made their garlic a scarcer and more expensive commodity, all of these factors as well as overwhelming Canadian consumer demand for our product have resulted in some great selling and pricing opportunities.

So what will this mean for the 2011 and future crops? With demand strong and prices to growers ranging from \$5 to \$ 10 per pound depending on where and in what form you sell, the outlook is very positive. One major chain has put Ontario garlic back on the shelves in their high value stores and have realized that they must pay a decent price in order to have the best product for their customers. Seed was in very short supply and will continue to be for some years to come. As growers we are looking to increase production from bulbuils as a possible way to increase acreage sooner.

However more research in proper methods needs to be done as historically growing from bulbuils has not always been successful. As an association we will be doing some research and posting the info for members on our website.

We will be applying for a sizeable Agricultural Adaptation Council grant to continue with our Clean Seed program development in light of the problems with bulb and stem nematode. It was pointed out by researchers at the meeting that fumigation has no effect. Because of the nature of garlic, you can sterilize the soil but if you plant infected garlic cloves then you just perpetuate the problem and the weather will determine how bad your damage will be. Crop rotation helps but you would typically need to wait at least five years before returning to an infected field and again, if you plant infected seed then you still have the problem.

We will be looking during the project on how to quickly increase the supply of clean seed for growers. So all in all, a well attended fall meeting with lots of input from members. We have lots of work for the years ahead. One other item that we did discuss was price. With any product you have to always be careful not to price yourself out of the marketplace. Garlic, although unique, may still need to remember this. At some point as price rises, the goodwill and pent-up demand for our product could evaporate if prices get too high. As growers we do of course need to ensure that we get the best return for our crop, so that is what we will have to balance in determining next season's price points.

On behalf of myself and your association, I hope the holidays have been good to you and your family as we all look forward to producing the best garlic in the world.

Source – The Grower 2010 (www.thegrower.org)