

## From chicory to camelina, Oregon grows a wide range of crops

by Bend\_Weekly\_News\_Sources

Oregon can boast about having one of the most diverse agriculture industries of all 50 states, with more than 225 commodities being produced within its borders. A look at the most recent US Census of Agriculture shows a number of crops that grow on a handful of Oregon farms, ranging from specialty fruits and vegetables to more common items traditionally grown in other states. It all adds up to nearly \$5 billion in agricultural sales for Oregon's economy. "We are not a big mono-agriculture state," says Laura Barton, trade manager with the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "Midwest states have thousands and thousands of acres planted in two crops- corn and soy beans. In Oregon, we have this wonderful tapestry of different crops." Oregon's climate, soil, and topography allow growers to produce a wide range of commodities. But the state's farmers and ranchers are also responsible for having a mindset that leads to crop diversity. "It speaks to the creative outlook of many growers who are willing to take risks or look outside the normal desire to just keep growing what they always have been growing," says Barton. "They are willing to try something new and address consumer trends that often show interest in new things." Some crops listed in the census were never produced in Oregon prior to a couple of years ago. Others have been around, but in such small numbers that most Oregonians would not know about them. Among the emerging commodities is olive production, primarily a California crop. "There are a few farms now that have planted olive orchards, primarily for pressing into oil," says Barton. "Olive oil has become quite trendy with the consumer and of interest to people involved with food. There are plantings both in southern Oregon and in Yamhill County." The 2007 Census of Agriculture officially lists eight olive farms covering 13 acres. While California produces about 10 percent of the world's table olives, some Oregon farmers are finding the loamy clay soil and temperate climate to be a reasonable environment for the slow growing olive tree. Another relatively new crop for Oregon is wild rice- already adapted to the upper Midwest states and several Canadian provinces. Two Linn County farms are listed in the census as producing wild rice on a commercial basis. In the last 15 years or so, chestnuts began showing up in local orchards as well as roasting on an open fire, as the song goes. In many cases, diversified growers looked for something different to add to their mix of crops and saw niche opportunities for a commodity that is usually imported to the US. Oregon chestnut production has now grown to more than 333 acres involving 92 farms, 17 of them in Lane County. Oregon growers say demand for domestic chestnuts is increasing, so they are responding. Kiwifruit sounds like something grown Down Under. In fact, New Zealand produces a vast amount of the fruit. But in Oregon, there are now 60 farms producing kiwifruit covering 67 acres, all in the fertile Willamette Valley. According to the census, there are other lesser-known food crops grown in Oregon. Some are fruits, some are vegetables, others are herbs. They include chicory (one farm listed in Linn County), collards (three farms in the Willamette Valley), okra (four farms located in Jackson, Lane, and Marion counties), ginseng (two farms in Columbia and Lane counties), escarole and endive (two farms in Klamath and Washington counties), horseradish (one farm in Columbia County), and pluots- a cross between a plum and an apricot (nine farms covering five acres). Oregon also offers a home to some limited production oilseed crops. There are four farms growing 69 acres of safflower, used to produce a vegetable oil. One Umatilla County farm reportedly grows dill for oil. A commodity once common in Oregon is now making a reappearance of sorts. Two Malheur County farms produce flaxseed, which is also processed into a vegetable oil. Older generations might remember large scale flax production in Oregon 60 years ago. No fewer than 14 Oregon mills turned flax fibers into linen. Now, efforts are aimed at producing an oil that contains nutritional value and is often used as a dietary supplement. Then there is a new oilseed crop arriving on the scene in Oregon. Camelina has shown promise as a source for biofuel production. As a crop that needs very few inputs such as water or fertilizer, camelina can be grown on marginal farm land unlike many other crops. There may be other commodities being grown in such small amounts in Oregon that the Census of Agriculture does not track them. And while an occasional commodity drops off the Oregon list of 225 or so- there was once a thriving turkey industry in Oregon- it seems more likely that the state will be adding new crops or at least new varieties of existing crops. It makes for a dynamic agriculture industry in Oregon. It all depends on the decisions made by producers. Some have been farming for a long time. Others are new to the industry. "You'll see many producers who are part of multi-generation farms looking to get a better return on their crops by trying something new or different," says Barton. "But there are also people who have never been in farming

before that are looking to produce something other growers aren't."Once again, the diversity of Oregon agriculture is one of its strengths. Just as a diversified investment portfolio protects against concentrated risk, having a long list of agricultural products often helps the industry avoid an overall drop. When one commodity suffers a bad year, chances are another one is doing well. On balance, the state's value of agricultural production continues to increase every year thanks, in part, to some crops you never knew even grew in Oregon.

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