

# Texas Onions

*Texas growers anticipate a good crop with promising markets and strong prices as season begins.*

## Cool weather delays start of Texas deal, new Vidalia ship date could extend season

By CHIP CARTER

The Texas onion deal will be a little late out of the gate this season but growers will get some help extending that season with a new later start date for Vidalia onion growers.

A cold winter by Texas standards — averaging about 10 degrees cooler than normal — will mean the Texas deal will not begin until about mid-March after harvest a week earlier. Mexico has also been behind this season due to cooler temperatures.

In late 2010, Texas onion growers appeared to be sitting pretty. They were coming off a year where their crop fetched as much as \$40 a box — roughly a dollar a pound. Consumer demand had grown steadily for several years.

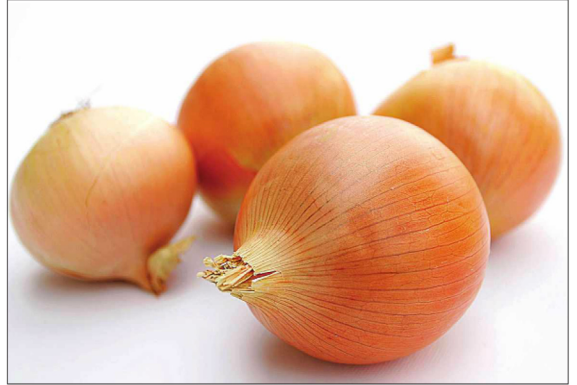
Any past problems were squarely in the rearview mirror.

Then, as almost always happens, a few growers decided if some was good, more was better. Overplanting was rampant, production boomed. The predictable result of too much product on the market was a drop in pricing. Two years of struggle followed.

In 2013, growers cut back acreage by 40 percent. Most managed to work out water rights in drought-plagued Texas. The result was a return to solid markets and solid profitability.

Texas growers learned from the struggles of 2011-12, put that knowledge into play in 2013 and will follow the same template for 2014.

They may actually get a boost from an unlikely (and in some cases unwill-



While the state grows red, white and yellow onions, Texas is best-known as the birthplace of the 1015 sweet onion, the template for the modern industry.

(Photo courtesy of USDA/ARS)

ing) ally as well — Vidalia onion growers. Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary Black earlier this year established a prohibition against early ship-

ping of Vidalia onions. Though there is a court challenge under way, as it stands now, no Vidalia onions can be packed

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Workers harvest onions in a Texas field last year. The 2014 season will be delayed by a cool winter.

(Photo courtesy of Texas A&M Agrilife)

## TAMU research seeks to improve sweet onion production worldwide

By CHIP CARTER

In 1898, a packet of Bermuda onion seeds was planted near Cotulla, TX. In spring of 1899, the resulting crop was shipped to Milwaukee, WI, and the mild, sweet onions were an instant hit. The next year a larger crop was planted and an industry was born.

Onions caught on quickly in the hot, dry climate. By 1904, 500 acres of Bermuda onions were planted in south Texas. In 1907, 1,011 train carloads of onions were shipped out of state. The next year, production doubled. In 1917 that figure leapt to 6,735 loads and by 1920 Texas had virtually put Bermuda out of the onion business.

Bermuda seeds had a tendency to

bolt or split. The impact on production led to the first onion-breeding program in the state at the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station in Winter Garden in 1933. That same year, working in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, researchers from Texas A&M University bred the Texas Grano 502, considered the mother of all sweet onions produced around the world today.

By 1940 the new onions were entering commercial production, and in 1944 TAMU released the 502 for sale around the world.

Four decades later, another TAMU researcher, Leonard Pike, now retired, would revolutionize the industry.

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Bhimu Patil



Leonard Pike



## Bland Farms' Mexico, Texas sweet onions take center stage in pre-Vidalia window

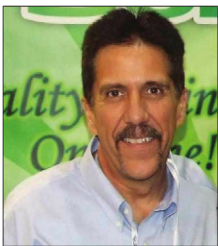
By CHIP CARTER

Though Bland Farms LLC has become an international giant in the sweet onion industry, the empire was built on Vidalia onions and they remain at the top of the pecking order at the company's Glennville, GA, headquarters. But the company's sweet onions from Mexico and Texas are playing an increasingly important role and take top billing this time of year.

Bland is one of the world's larger grower-shippers of Vidalia onions and has a 12-month sweet onion program with farms around the world. But owner Delbert Bland is planning for even bigger and better things.

"With the new highway and bridge coming into place in Mexico, Texas is just booming and is going to get bigger every day," said Bland, who also operates a mammoth distribution facility, Bland Distribution Services, in Donna, TX.

Bland's marketing savvy helped propel Vidalia onions into the national spotlight in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the company grew to control that market. In the 2000s, it expanded operations to become a 12-month supplier of sweet onions with operations in Georgia, Texas, New



Nick Sanchez manages Bland Distribution Services' cross-dock in Donna, TX.

York, California, Oregon, Washington, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile and Guatemala.

"We know a lot about how to grow onions," Bland said. "But when you go to the next level and are managing a multimillion-dollar company you have to have people who are expert in their fields to assist you, that's for sure. I learned a long time ago you best hire people who're smarter than you are if you want to survive."

Bland has built a top-notch team of executives to help lead Bland Farms into the future. He is equally excited about the promise sons Troy and Landis, who have been with the company for several years now, are showing in the deal.

"You've got to love what

you're doing or you can't do it or won't be good at it, you'll just do it because you have to, you've got to love what you do. What's exciting to me now is watching my sons get involved in the business and they have the same passion I do and that really makes you feel good," Bland said.

Troy Bland was recently promoted to director of operations after filling that same role on an interim basis for the last year.

Bland also knows his sons will benefit and learn from the executive team he has put together. "There ain't nobody



Bland Distribution Services' cross-dock facility in Donna, TX, has decreased loading times dramatically in recent months.

any better than the people that are around them every day," Bland said. "People are really, really dedicated to this company. It makes a tremendous amount of difference. At the

end of the day that's what it's all about. It doesn't matter where you've been or where you're going — who you love and who loves you is all that matter when it's all over with."



Bland Distribution Services' cross-dock facility in Donna, TX, has been a tremendous success and already expanded since opening five years ago

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or shipped prior to April 15. Some Georgia growers said they will not even begin that soon this year.

That means Texas will have a wider window of exclusivity for its homegrown product, as much as a six-week window.

"Over the years the Vidalia growers have chipped away at the Texas deal by packing earlier and earlier," said Marvin Davis of Tex Mex Sales in Weslaco, TX. "They weren't doing themselves any favors by putting in the early-season product on the market before it was ready, some of them anyway. If consumers don't have a good experience early in the season, they're not going to come back."

A judge is expected to rule on a court challenge to the Georgia pack-and-ship date some time in March. If the date

is upheld, Texas growers will reclaim part of their original exclusivity window. If not, they stand to benefit anyway as some Vidalia growers have said they will not ship earlier onions regardless of the outcome of the judicial proceedings.

Meanwhile, "Sweet onions coming out of Mexico this year have been outstanding and the Texas crop looks even better," said Delbert Bland of Bland Farms LLC in Glennville, GA, which also has operations in Mexico and the Lone

Star State. "With the new highway and bridge in Mexico, the Southwest is becoming more important in the onion deal every day."

"It's still early, but the crop looks really good," added Tex Mex's Mike Davis.

Lone Star State growers are looking at promising markets

— in the low and mid-20s in late February and early March — and decreased production in Mexico this year after similar drops in 2013 bode well for Texas.

Some key growing areas also benefited from several significant rain events over the last few months that helped growers stave off ever-present worries about water supplies.

"Prices should be strong," said Bret Erickson, president of the Texas International Produce Association. "We still need moisture. But quality looks to be excellent and we will have a good supply of sweet onions out of Texas."

In 2013 "there was one week in there you could actually call winter and that was it, the first week of January," said Don Ed

Holmes of The Onion House in Weslaco. This year the cooler weather provided a reverse of 2013.

And while the crop is late, Holmes was quick to note that onions are dormant during much of the production cycle, getting most of their growth in the month before harvest, and thus virtually impervious to cooler weather.



Texas onions being clipped in the field.

## TAMU research seeks to continually improve sweet onion production worldwide

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When it comes to vegetables in Texas, onions are atop the heap. The state moves between \$75 million and \$100 million worth of onions annually. The majority of those are sweet Granex onions, but there are plenty of reds and white as well. The overall impact on the Texas economy is about \$350 million each year.

Much of that success can be directly attributed to the development of the Texas 1015 Y.

Pike's contributions to the industry were legendary, but he has typically downplayed his achievements over the years.

His wife, Roxy A. Pike, told *The Produce News*, "When I surprised Leonard with a personalized Texas license plate with

'1015' on it, his first reaction was, 'I can't drive around with that on my truck!' I explained part of the cost went to scholarships at TAMU and he finally relented. Later, he was very proud of it and it opened the door for him to 'talk onions.' As his wife, I can tell you he never has accepted that he is a celebrity. He simply enjoyed his work more than anyone I have ever known, had a great energy and passion for it and, as he says, 'I loved helping people.'"

Bhimu Patil is one of the people Pike helped. A former student of Pike, today Patil is an esteemed professor and director of The Vegetable Improvement Center at TAMU — the same position his men-

tor held.

"I was a student of Dr. Pike when he was breeding onions. My job is to take the next step and it's not easy to fill his shoes," Patil said. "We are going beyond what they used to do."

"The varieties developed at A&M after Dr. Pike are milder and sweeter still. The 1015 was a great contribution to the Texas onion industry at that time and even now. If he didn't develop the 1015 the industry wouldn't be here now. Recently a study was done on how it affected the economy of Texas. Over 10 years it contributed about \$350 million and still the economic impact of the 1015 on the Texas economy is tremendous."