

THIS IS POTATO COUNTRY U. S. A.

by

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Welcome this morning to Potato Country U. S. A. - Laying claim to Potato Country U. S. A. was almost a natural for the State of Washington. It is blessed with all the environmental conditions considered ideal for raising potatoes, rich lava soil, arid desert-like climate, ready supply of water for irrigation and an extended growing season.

But natural resources were not enough to turn Washington into a major potato producing state. The moving force was a group of determined and progressive growers utilizing the latest cultural practices and the most modern farming equipment available to them.

The potato growing industry here is little more than 20 years old. Yet, during that relative short span of time, Washington has moved into the position of being the second largest potato producing state in the nation. Less than 10 years ago it was only in fifth place.

The most dramatic surge in production growth has taken place since 1963 when processors of frozen and dehydrated potatoes moved in and launched a major plant expansion. In the last 12 years Washington's total production has shot up 446%.

Potatoes are grown primarily in Eastern Washington, which is separated from the Western part of the state by the mighty Cascade range. These mountains act as a barrier against the Pacific winds to create an arid climate with hot summers and cold winters. The annual rainfall in Eastern Washington is less than 8 inches providing an abundance of warm sunny days and cool evenings during the potato growing season.

Washington's growing season is extended from early March to late October, 60 to 90 days longer than most other states. It is least susceptible to early frost damage, and therefore can insure a continuity of supply to buyers year in and year out.

Combined with the rich volcanic soil and the use of sophisticated farming methods, Washington's ideal climate conditions afford a top yield per acre, 460 hundredweight versus a national average of 246 hundredweight.

Two main varieties of potatoes are produced in Washington - the Russet Burbank and the Norgold Russet. Other varieties raised include Kennebec, Round Reds, Long Whites and Norchips, but they constitute less than 3% of the total production.

Norgold Russet, which accounts for only 11% of the acreage is an early 90 day variety, planted in March and harvested by mid-July. It is marketed for about 60-70 days for fresh use and to a limited extent for processing.

Russet Burbank, the variety favored for fresh and processing accounts for 86% of Washington's total production. A 120-130 day maturing potato, it is planted from mid-April to late May, with harvesting beginning in the middle of August.

Because Idaho has been producing and promoting Russet Burbanks under the name "Idaho" for so many years, the general public often refers to any Russet Burbank as an Idaho.

The potato variety known as Russet Burbank was actually developed over 100 years ago on a small truck farm just outside Groton, Massachusetts by a horticulturist named Luther Burbank, who became popularly known as "the plant wizard". He produced more than 220 varieties of trees,

vegetables, fruits, flowers and grasses during his lifetime. The Russet Burbank was his first real success.

Potatoes are grown by planting pieces of potatoes with "eyes", therefore, the plants seldom develop from seeds above the ground. Burbank was fortunate enough to find a potato seed ball containing 23 seeds on a plant in his garden.

He sowed the seeds he discovered in a special plot of ground, and each bore a different kind of potato. Some were withered and inedible, others no better than the commercial potatoes already being grown. But, one plant produced large, firm, uniformly shaped potatoes with relatively smooth skins.

Burbank saved the best of these and reaped a harvest. Upon seeing the quality of the first crop a seed dealer offered him \$150 for the right to market the new potatoes under the name Russet Burbank, the former roughly describing their yellow-brownish color, the latter their discoverer.

In time, of course, the Russet Burbank potatoes found their way to California, then to the Northwest, first to Idaho and later to Washington. Washington did not begin growing Idaho Russet Burbank potatoes in earnest until 1954, when water for irrigation became more readily available. But, since then, it has emerged as a major producer, second only to Idaho.

Russet Burbank potatoes grow exceptionally well in Washington soil. During 1974 Washington growers produced a crop half the size of Idaho's on 25% of the acreage. Yield per acre in Washington averages 460 hundredweight per acre with some growers harvesting in excess of 650 hundredweight.

Washington produced 48,300,000 hundredweight in 1975-76. Of that amount 6,500 hundredweight will be shipped fresh this season. The balance will be used by processing plants to make frozen french fries and dehydrated potatoes. Distribution of both the fresh and processed products are world wide.