

Potato trial produces a high quality table potato and a new opportunity for farmers in St. Lucia

Since the turn of the century, agriculture in St. Lucia has been in decline. According to a 2010 EU Report, between the period of 1999 to 2007 there was a 42% reduction in the acreage in agriculture and in the past decade, more than 50% reduction in the number of men and women employed in the sector. The dwindling agricultural sector accounts for less than 4% of GDP and most of that has been dominated by the banana industry. Despite this trend, demand for fresh produce on the local market is rising, especially to meet demand from the growing tourism industry. The agricultural sector and the government of St. Lucia have been actively looking for ways to diversify and promote domestic food production for national food security.



CTV NEWS - Irish Potato Yields Success in St. Lucia

Minister of Agriculture at the launch and taste testing of the Potato trials.
View at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUNCCpsVH-c>

Consolidated Foods Limited (CFL) onboard with potato pilot program

Following up on successes with PROPEL’s potato development programs in Jamaica, the PROPEL team determined that St. Lucia, with its fertile soils and cool mountainous terrain, would be a good fit for potato production. While some St. Lucian farmers have had experience producing roots and tubers, especially sweet potatoes, dasheen and yams, over the years production has dwindled as many farmers migrated to banana production or out of farming altogether. Early in 2015, CFL, a strategic partner that manages the largest chain of supermarkets on the island, was approached to work with PROPEL to encourage farmers to grow potatoes in St. Lucia. CFL is an important buyer of fresh produce in St. Lucia and Perishables Manager, Mr. Dunstan Demille, was excited by the challenge and was quick to come on board, promising to purchase all of the potatoes produced in the trial.



WUSC Agronomist Julius Polius and “Freedom” work side by side in the potato fields



PROPEL potato pilot program

The PROPEL/CFL program involved a trial to evaluate three varieties of potatoes to determine their suitability for production in St. Lucia. PROPEL provided the seeds and the varieties, which included Challenger, Chieftain and Spunta. CFL’s Mr. Demille and PROPEL agronomist, Julius Polius, worked together to find the suitable areas and producers for the trial. Mr. Raphael “Freedom” Gaston’s Farm at Desraches, Soufriere was selected as it is at 1,900 feet above sea level and enjoys cooler night temperatures which are required for optimum tuberization of potatoes. The potatoes were planted in mid February and were harvested in mid May. Throughout the crop cycle, PROPEL provided technical guidance on land preparation, planting, pest and disease control and fertilizer use. Farmer “Freedom” Gaston stated,

“This was the first time that I have grown potatoes. I was very happy with the experience and the help that PROPEL provided. I plan to plant more potatoes in the future and increase the acreage”.

In this first trial, Mr. Gaston was able to produce above international yields at around 18,000 lbs. per acre. PROPEL's Senior Regional Agricultural Coordinator, Mr. Alvin Murray, who worked with Mr. Poilus to oversee the trials, suggested that there is evidence that some farmers, especially the ones in the hills with cooler night time temperatures, could achieve upward of 20-25,000 lbs. per acre. He was confident that, with attention to soil moisture content, potatoes can be cultivated on St. Lucian hillsides year round.

Potatoes fair well in blind taste tests

As part of the trials, the locally grown potatoes were supplied to the award winning chef of Orlando's Restaurant to prepare dishes for taste testing by farmers, officials of Ministry of Agriculture and the public. In the blind taste tests, the trial potatoes were mixed with imported potato varieties. The presentations were boiled, pan-fried, chips/crisp, French fries, mashed and baked. Participants were unable to discern any difference between the local potato and imported potatoes with regard to texture, taste, appearance and other qualitative attributes. Chef Satchell was happy to daub the trial potatoes, "Lucian Potatoes" and said, "having potatoes grown locally will be a tremendous boost to the farmers and the tourism product".

CFL happy with program and pledges continued support

Mr. Demille commended PROPEL saying, "With PROPEL taking a market-led approach, to increasing production of key fresh produce items, it taught us (CFL) that we can get better returns on our investment if you do it right. Never before have I witnessed a program that achieves the intended outcome like I have seen with PROPEL. PROPEL understands that you must make your implementation processes as simple as can be. With the results that have been achieved, I have no issue continuing to be a part of the PROPEL Project where we can continue the transformation of the agricultural sector with a great focus on empowering farmers in the region".



Top Chef Orlando Satchell praises the quality of the locally grown potatoes



Potato varieties are put to the test



Following the success of the Potato Trial, CFL commits to expand the program to other roots & tubers.

View TV interview www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu-U07GkuxA

As a result of this trial, CFL has committed to engage 24 farmers to produce Spunta and Chieftain potatoes on over 25 acres in St. Lucia. PROPEL is providing the Super Elite Seeds for this program and CFL will purchase all of the produce from the farmers and pay them, net the value of the seeds. The money from those proceeds will become a revolving fund to purchase seeds for future harvests.