

JG

WHAT'S DOGGING
ROMNEY'S CAMPAIGN?
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TRUSTED
TRAVELERS

› JEWISH GEOGRAPHY

PHOTO: OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY



Micah Anderson installs a plasticulture garden at the governor's mansion in Oklahoma City

Farm Yield Signs Point Higher

TECHNIQUES USED IN "KOSHER" FARMING
ARE PROVING THEIR WORTH

With the exception of colorful and sweet-smelling flowers that decorate our synagogues on Shavuot, little connection seems to remain between the holiday and its agricultural roots.

Almost 2,000 years after the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, only our imaginations can give us a glimpse what the *bikurim* procession to Jerusalem must have looked like, with Jews carrying their first fruits in gold and silver baskets to musical accompaniment. ➔

“We have one guy who was working at a tire plant and lost his job when the plant closed. Today he’s doing very well and he likes this job better than the one he lost”

— Micah Anderson

In the intervening years, farming itself has experienced erosion as a profession of necessity, even though one important fact never changes. Without agriculture, there is no food.

In America, farmland has been vanishing for well over a century. In 1850, nearly 1.5 million US farms fed a population of 23 million; that meant one farm for every 15 people. By 2010, the population grew to 309 million but the nation has only 2.2 million farms, or one for every 140 people.

In Israel, where hard Jewish labor helped make the desert bloom, today’s young Israeli is more likely to be a pioneer in high-tech than on the land, although a few innovative people and companies are combining the best of both worlds.

More than 4,000 agriculture experts worldwide converged in Tel Aviv last week for Agritech 2012, an exhibit of many of the latest farm technologies. The farming method known as “plasticulture” dominated the list of the Agritech seminars. “Plasticulturists” grow crops inside greenhouses and high plastic tunnels, utilizing special screening to protect vegetables and fruits from adverse weather conditions and insect infestation. In that regard, kosher producers, whether in Gush Katif, or Ecuador, have been far ahead of the curve, using plasticulture techniques to grow bug-free broccoli and cauliflower.

Take a Sunday drive — for those who have Sunday off — along an Israeli highway and one will notice farmland dotted with plastic tents and greenhouses.

Israeli farmers have learned to overcome the country’s chronic land and water shortages by spearheading the use of highly productive greenhouse technologies.

Compared to many countries, greenhouse production of vegetables in the US is still small.

Professor Daniel Cantliffe of the University of Florida, one of the Agritech attendees, noted that plasticulture accounts for only a small percentage of America’s more than 2 million acres of fresh produce grown in fields.

Considering the major challenges facing the vegetable industry, including increased regulation of water, fertilizer, and pesticides, plus increased urbanization and weather extremes, he hopes that more farmers will turn to plasticulture in the years ahead. “The added protection by plasticulture leads to production of higher-quality crops that make growers more competitive against imports from other vegetable production areas in the world,” says Cantliffe.

Seven years ago, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry plowed ahead with its own plasticulture grant program for small farmers. Market coordinator Micah Anderson says this initiative is already bearing fruit, despite a high initial investment.

“It may take a couple of years for a farmer to come out ahead but the benefits are there,” says Anderson. Since plastic helps keep the ground warmer, crops tend to grow earlier in the season. “Normally, we don’t get sweet corn in this part of Oklahoma until the end of June or early July, but I have ears of sweet corn growing on plastic and it’s only the middle of May.”

The Oklahoma program has produced some social benefits as well. Incarcerated youths at two juvenile centers have been put to work learning to grow fruits and vegetables at greenhouse facilities. It has also helped the unemployed people find new careers.

“We have one guy who was working at a tire plant and lost his job when the plant closed,” says Anderson. He subsequently used a small plot of family land for plasticulture. “Today he’s doing very well,” said Anderson, “and he likes this job better than the one he lost.”

— Binyamin Rose



PHOTO: OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

A whale of a cabbage grown with plasticulture