

## **IN OUR FIELD: Exciting times at Desert Research and Extension Center**

**By SAM URIE Special to this Newspaper | Posted: Thursday, June 26, 2014 7:25 am**

Have you filled up your vehicle's fuel tank recently? Have you eaten a carrot, a pickle, sweet corn, onion, broccoli or melon recently? Had a nice crisp salad with fresh romaine lettuce and some pasta, then dipped some bread in olive oil? How about a stir-fry with tender beef and cooked cabbage or a nice steak?

What does all of this have to do with the UC Desert Research and Extension Center, known by many in our Valley as the "Meloland Station" between Holtville and El Centro? All of these are crops and issues being worked on by researchers and support staff here at DREC. The 255-acre center is part of a larger network of nine similar locations throughout California called the Research and Extension Center under UC's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources. This center is an amazing resource for our Valley; it's here to support our most important industry and one that affects us all — agriculture.

Just outside my office door, my colleagues are weighing and categorizing wheat grown here at DREC that will be essential to meet European regulations in the future. Ninety percent of wheat grown in our Valley has levels of cadmium (a non-essential metal) too high for the European Union. This jeopardizes the export of our wheat to Europe. Wheat breeders are hard at work creating new varieties with lower cadmium levels. Work is also being done to increase disease resistance and salt tolerance. About 150 new hybrid wheat varieties will be created at DREC this year.

All of us worry about fuel prices and how they affect our families and local businesses. Researchers at DREC are working with a variety of plants to find viable sources for biofuels. Imagine an Imperial Valley that not only produces geothermal and solar energy, but biofuels as well. We have a suitable growing environment for crops such as sorghum, sugarcane, so-called "energy canes" (*Saccharum* grasses) and oilseed crops like canola, camelina and lesquerella.

Did you know carrots don't just come in orange? You may soon start seeing shades of purple, red and other colors at the grocery store. These varieties also carry more antioxidants that our bodies need. Every year in February the carrot plots at DREC are harvested and a rainbow of carrots is analyzed together with researchers from the University of Wisconsin and the USDA.

Farm Smart is the outreach arm of DREC. Over 104,000 people have toured the center since the program began in 2001. We are passionate about educating youths and their parents. Every year thousands of Valley youths come to the center to learn about agriculture, natural resources and

scientific research. We send them home with produce they pick themselves; we hope we send them home with seeds of knowledge and understanding for the future. Farm Smart also partners with CalFresh to deliver nutrition education to our youths.

Farm Smart also hosts thousands of “snowbirds” in January and February through our winter visitor program. We educate visitors about Valley agriculture and water issues and send them home with fresh produce. Make sure to sign up for one of our tours next winter if you’d like to experience a day on the farm.

The center is here to serve the Valley — not just farmers, but the whole community. DREC is vital to the Valley’s future. We’d love to share our research with you. Take a tour next winter. Check out our new website at [drec.ucanr.edu](http://drec.ucanr.edu) and find our research on the research tab to the left.

Strong Valley agriculture doesn’t just help growers, it helps our nation. So next time you pick up a fork to eat that delicious meal, thank all those who did so much to get it there on your plate. And think, next year, your carrots might just be purple.

Sam Urie is the manager of Farm Smart at the UC Desert Research and Extension Center in Holtville. He can be reached at [surie@ucanr.edu](mailto:surie@ucanr.edu) or 760-356-3067.