

Commercial Head Lettuce

economic status, 1947

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The following extract is from Agricultural Experiment Station Circular 378 which may be obtained without cost by sending a request to Publications Office, University of California College of Agriculture, Berkeley 4, California.

California had 61% of the country's total commercial lettuce acreage in 1947.

Of the five seasonal types of lettuce California produces all, extensively, except the late-spring type.

Spring lettuce acreage has tended to vary, over time, more than the other seasonal types.

At present, fall lettuce acreage is the largest in the state, with spring lettuce acreage a close second. Winter and summer lettuce acreage follow, in importance, in that order.

The marked expansion in California lettuce acreage since 1943 was accompanied by a fairly stable percentage distribution between the major seasonal types.

The Salinas-Watsonville-Hollister district and the Imperial Valley are the dominant acreage and producing areas, although other areas—such as San Joaquin Valley and part of the Central Coast—have significant acreage.

The Imperial Valley district acreage is primarily of the winter seasonal type, and is about of the same magnitude as the rest of the state, excluding the Salinas-Watsonville-Hollister district.

Production and Yield

With the sharp increase of 1944 commercial lettuce production over 1943, and with another substantial increase in 1946, the country's annual production reached almost the equivalent of 34 million western crates—about 70 pounds each—or about three and one half times the average annual output during 1920–1924. Production in 1947 was 34.2 million crates, or slightly higher than in 1946.

Although production in states other than California has increased over the years, its increase in terms of crates produced has been much less than California's increase.

For winter lettuce, the yield in California dropped sharply from 191 crates per acre during 1920–1924 to a low point of 102 crates per acre during 1930–1934. The winter lettuce yield then rose for the next several years and dropped again in 1941. But thereafter, the yield rose for four consecutive years and reached a peak for California in 1945. In both 1946 and 1947, the average yield was less.

California had an increased yield of early-spring lettuce in 1947, with the average yield equaling the 1943 high.

In the production of summer lettuce, California's harvested yield and that of other states were similar up to 1941. Since 1942, California's yield has been much higher while that of the other states has remained at its earlier level. The state's 1947 yield was the highest on record for its summer lettuce.

The yield of fall lettuce in California fell sharply during the early 1920's, similar to what happened in the winter and early-spring seasonal types.

California production has increased consistently over the years, even in the face of declining acreage from 1930–1934 through 1943.

With the maintenance of yields at their recent levels, additional California acreage planted to lettuce will result in record production.

In the face of expanding production, farm returns can be maintained only if consumer demand continues to increase.

Shipments

Each year since 1935 California has shipped almost 70% of total carlot interstate shipments in the United States.

California's proportion of total shipments of winter lettuce is now about 60% compared with 75% 15 years ago.

Our early spring lettuce—50%—and late spring—80%—account for nearly the same proportions of the country's total shipments as a decade and a half ago.

For summer lettuce the California proportion of 90%–95% has increased only slightly.

Fall lettuce, however, has experienced a decline over the years of from 78% to 50%.

Consumption

Beginning with 1940, the consumption of lettuce, as well as other fresh vegetables, grew sharply during the World War II period.

In the postwar years 1946 and 1947, lettuce consumption remained very high, exceeding the prewar years.

In general, considering the average of all income groups, commercial lettuce

consumption in urban households is larger than in rural nonfarm households.

Farm Prices

Beginning with the 1942 season, lettuce prices rose sharply along with those of other products. The wartime peak of lettuce farm prices, as well as of other truck crops, was reached in 1943, but farm prices for fruits continued to rise through 1946.

For all seasonal types, the 1947 farm price was substantially above that of 1946, with early spring lettuce showing the greatest increase and fall lettuce the smallest increase.

In general, lettuce farm prices during the past three decades did not rise as high nor fall as low as did the prices of truck crops or fruits generally.

Price Outlook

If the prices of truck crops in general do not change sharply because of unpredictable factors and if there is no sharp break in consumers' income in the very near future, current indications are that 1948 lettuce prices will be not be unfavorable.

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Pest control problems receiving attention by the Division of Entomology at Davis include the grape leafhopper, peach twig borer, red spiders on deciduous fruits and grapes, and truck crop insects.

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