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Organic onion category holding its own

By Tom Burfield

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Consumer Reports lists onions among the produce items least likely to be contaminated with pesticides and therefore ranks them near the bottom of its list of items consumers should buy in the organic section.

Nonetheless, there is a market for organic onions, and several grower-shippers include them in their product lines.

Peri & Sons Farms Inc., Yerington, Nev., offers a full line of organic onions, including white, yellow, red, sweet and the company's Sweetie Sweet variety, said Teri Gibson, marketing and customer relations manager.

Gibson agreed consumers tend to rank vegetables that have more risk of spreading foodborne illnesses higher on their organic must-have list than onions.

"Onions are considered safer and less susceptible to bacteria, so there's not as much of a focus by consumers on organic onions," she said.

But still, she said, even during the economic downturn, "Our organic business has held pretty steady."

The company has offered organic onions since 2007.

"There was a market demand, so we got into it," she said.

The company always grew its onions "in a very clean and safe manner," she said, so transitioning to organics was not difficult.

Delbert Bland, owner of Bland Farms LLC, Glennville, Ga., believes that if he's going to be in the onion business, he needs to have a one-stop shop. That's why the company offers organic onions year-round — half the year with sweet onions and the other half with conventional ones.

Bland Farms kicked off its spring organic deal in late April, and Bland said he has not seen any cutbacks because of the weak economy.

"Onions are a staple item, and I haven't seen any drop in movement," he said, and that goes for organics, as well as conventional product.

The firm's organic program is 4 years old.

Traverse City, Mich.-based Battle Produce Exchange, the company that markets Oso Sweet onions, plans to launch its first Oso Organic program in September with onions from Peru, said president John Battle.

Without question, the move is the result of customer requests, he said.

"Demand is ringing so loudly, it's foolish to ignore it," he said.

The program will start off with 20,000 to 30,000 packages of organic onions out of a half million total from Peru.

If the Peruvian organic program is successful, Battle expects to source organic onions from the company's growing regions in Chile and Texas.

Usually, grower-shippers can reap premium prices for organic produce, but that may not be the case this year, said Barry Rogers, president of Sweet Onion Trading Co., Melbourne, Fla.

Because of high prices on conventional onions, especially early in the season, organic onions from the company's two organic growers may seem quite moderate.

Rogers said he expected to start shipping organic product during the first half of May for about \$32 a box, which is about the same price conventional onions were selling for. The organic crops look good, and yields should be good, as well, he said.

However, Rogers does not see the organic onion category as being as strong as some other shippers perceive it.

"We don't push (organic onions), but we have them available," he said.

Similarly, Derrell Kelso Jr., owner and president of Onions Etc. in Stockton, Calif., said his company maintains its certification as an organic packer, but he considers growing organic onions risky, especially during a weak economy.

"It's tough to grow organics," he said.

Nonetheless, his buyers want cheap prices as consumers struggle to keep their food expenditures at 10%.

"It's hard to give them that," he said.

