Walla Walla sweet onion harvest kicks off next week

Walla Walla sweet onion farmers start harvesting their crop the week of June 12.

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Walla Walla sweet onion harvest begins the week of June 12.

Walla Walla sweet onion farmers will begin harvest the week of June 12.

“We had a long spring, it was kind of wet,” said Michael J. Locati, chairman of the Walla Walla Sweet Onion Marketing Committee. “Things didn’t really want to grow real fast, so we didn’t start as early as we did last year, but this is more of a normal year for us.”

Walla Walla sweets are a specialty onion protected by a federal marketing order, which designates them as a unique variety and establishes a federally protected growing area, the Walla Walla Valley of southeast Washington and northeast Oregon.

The onions are noted for their low pyruvic acid content — pyruvic acid is what makes onions pungent — and high water content, which makes for a juicy, flavorful product.

Harvest typically lasts from mid-June to mid-August.

“There should be a steady flow that entire time,” Locati said.

Twenty farmers raise Walla Walla sweet onions on 500 acres, according to the marketing committee. Yields average 650 50-pound units per acre.

Fall-planted onions look good, Locati said, and he expects an easy transition into harvesting spring-planted onions.

Roughly 40 percent of the onions are usually jumbo-sized, about 3 to 4 inches in diameter, with 10 percent colossal-sized, at 4 inches in diameter or larger. The rest are medium-sized.

Locati expects an average crop, although some of the onions may be on the smaller side.

Farmers didn’t have to put up with a lot of disease and insect pressure thanks to the cold winter, Locati said.

“We didn’t see nearly the amount of thrips we usually see,” he said. “I think pest pressure was down. And then it didn’t get real hot. ... Hopefully everything comes out OK.”

Just as farmers are getting into their onion fields, the Walla Walla Sweet Onion Festival begins in downtown Walla Walla at 9 a.m. June 17.

Highlights include chef demonstrations, music, several dance companies and a Seattle Seahawks tour bus, said Kathy Fry-Trommald, executive director of the marketing committee.

The event is held in conjunction with the Downtown Walla Walla Foundation. She estimates the festival drew 5,000 people previously.

Walla Walla sweet onions are the Washington state vegetable, Fry-Trommald said. The festival promotes awareness of the onions and the history of the industry.

“We’ll be having an onion-eating contest, and I don’t know how much history those folks are going to be focusing on, but they’re going to have a good time,” she said with a laugh. “We usually have some pretty good people sitting up there willing to eat a raw onion.”

Several growers will sell onions at the festival, Locati said.

He hopes to be able to attend the event.

“We’re probably going to be in the thick of harvest,” he said. “Sometimes it’s tough, but there’s definitely a farmer presence there. There’ll be sweet onions there, for sure.”