

The sweet ONION

of Hyde County's blacklands

by Carla Burgess

There's high demand for the amazing
Mattamuskeet Sweet Onion from Alligator River Growers

Ancient Egyptians often decorated their dead with onions before mummification, according to scholars, because they believed the aroma would prompt the deceased to breathe again. Clearly, those onions were nothing like the ones Wilson Daughtry grows. His mild, sweet variety would awaken only the lightest of sleepers.

On a farm in Engelhard, 75 miles due east of Washington, Daughtry is summoning a crop not traditionally sown in North Carolina. Onions, let alone sweet varieties, aren't grown on a large scale anywhere else in the state. But for nine years now, the bulbing vegetable has found a comfortable home in the highly organic soils of this Hyde County farm. Here in eastern North Carolina's "blacklands," Daughtry is making his mark with a no-tears onion he believes is more appealing than a Vidalia.

Just a breeze shy of the vast Pamlico Sound, the 100-acre fields yield 40,000 pounds of sweet treats labeled and sold as "Mattamuskeet Sweet Onions." (The farm lies about 5 miles east of the state's largest natural lake, Lake Mattamuskeet.) Daughtry believes the buffering effect of the sound moderates temperatures, allowing him to overwinter the fall-seeded crop for a June harvest. The result is a plump, mild onion whose flavor has earned it a reputation around these parts.

Every year, Wilbur Oliver, 74, of Columbia drives his pickup to Engelhard to load up 50-pound bags of Mattamuskeet Sweet Onions. It's 86 miles there and back, but Oliver says it's worth the ride. "I like 'em better than any onion I've tried," he says. Last year, Oliver brought home 2 tons of onions in 85 bags. One year, he hitched a trailer and hauled 125 bags.

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Oliver's wife died 12 years ago, and he says he cooks very little. But his onions don't gather dust. Oliver gives them to widows, friends, relatives, "old folks" and the man who sells him tires for his truck. "The other day a friend said, 'Buddy, isn't it about time for the onions to come off again?' I said yes, I've got your name at the top of the list."

As word of the savory product has spread, Daughtry, 41, and his wife, Debbie, 39, have cultivated a lively new market for their onions. It started when walk-in customers said they wished there was a way to get the onions to friends and relatives. The Daughtrys decided to try a mail-order venture in which they'd ship the onions in 10-pound and 40-pound cartons. Today, they ship thousands of mail-order cartons. Debbie says one customer paid nearly \$80 in freight to send a box to a friend in Hawaii.

So what's so special about a Mattamuskeet Sweet Onion? The market is flooded with sweet onions from all over the country—Washington's Walla Walla, Texas' SuperSweets, Georgia's Vidalias and California's Sweet Imperials, to name a few. Sweet onions are considered a "fresh" onion, lightly cured to encourage a delicate, papery layer for protection. They typically last a few weeks to a couple of months. The Mattamuskeet is available for a short time—early June through late July—and Daughtry has no interest in improving the shelf life. The rarity keeps the onion in demand and its price stable.

The onion's shape also is distinctive—unlike the flattened, elliptical Vidalia, the Mattamuskeet is globe-shaped, arguably easier to slice and more substantial after the top and bottom are pared. It's somewhat bigger than a Vidalia—averaging 4 inches—and stores slightly longer. Daughtry says the onion retains its unique flavor even after cooking. His favorite recipe is a cored onion stuffed with butter, drizzled with soy sauce and baked in foil atop a grill.

But there's more to this onion than what you see and taste. The local specialty is the product of a lot of love, a little ingenuity, and a determined, if not stubborn, will to make it grow. Six would-be onion farmers in Hyde County preceded Daughtry and were not able to withstand the obstacles of weed infestation and varieties that simply weren't suitable or desirable. One of those initial growers, local agricul-

ture extension agent Mac Gibbs, says Daughtry has been downright tenacious.

"He saw potential and has been willing to do what it took to make this a successful venture," says Gibbs, who continues to advise Daughtry, provide technical support and help with variety trials. He says Daughtry has expended considerable capital and invested in research. And he knows how to sell his business to financiers and brokers. The onion facility is an impressive combination of specialized equipment and engineering. The production warehouse itself is an acre in size.

The character of an onion depends on soil, climate and weather. Gibbs says that the majority of onions in the United States are grown on "muck" soils. Indeed in April, the field felt as sticky and spongy as an exposed tidal flat. The same peat that formed the bed of Lake Mattamuskeet fuels the fertile soils of Hyde County farmland.

The sweetness of an onion is determined by the balance between sugar content and pyruvic acid (the sulfuric compound that causes tears to flow). While those factors can be measured scientifically, the ultimate flavor is subjective. It comes down to each person's palate.

Daughtry trusts his taste buds to decide whether a variety stays or gets the boot.

In spite of the success so far, the Daughtrys haven't put all their eggs in one gunnysack. Alligator River Growers is still primarily a grain farm, with corn, soybeans, onions and a few snap beans on 4,500 acres, both leased and owned. The Daughtrys plan to expand their mail-order inventory to include autumn specialty baskets of Indian corn and ornamental pumpkins and gourds. Wilson even envisions buying a small tour bus that will show Outer Banks tourists around the farm for a certain price per head. He'll give each one a parting gift of onions. "I think it would work," says Wilson excitedly, as Debbie smiles in a manner that suggests patience and leniency.

Daughtry sunk his teeth into farming when he moved to Engelhard in 1984.

The son of a retired Johnston County farmer, he had just earned a degree in agricultural economics from N.C. State University. He quickly graduated from managing someone else's farm to operating his own. Wilson also married Debbie, a native of nearby Fairfield, and they have a 6-year-old daughter, Miranda. Debbie also has a son, Michael, 23, who

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The bagging operation at Alligator River Growers.



Wilson Daughtry with some sweet, young onions.

attends East Carolina University. Her mom is the Fairfield postmaster, and her father worked for the U.S. Forest Service.

By the time U.S. 264 reaches Engelhard, it's a winding, two-lane black-top, and the town just a bend in the road. Engelhard has a small hotel for folks passing through, a restaurant, a place to gas up the car and little else. Asked what they do for fun, Wilson says, "Farm."

Carla Burgess is a freelance writer in Raleigh. Carolina Country also has published her stories about collards, rural transportation and solar energy.



Contact the grower

Visitors to Alligator River Growers can buy a 50-pound bag of Mattamuskeet Sweet Onions for as little as \$7. The premium, hand-selected onions are \$6 for a 10-pound box, and \$16 for the 40-pound carton (add shipping for mail orders). Call the toll-free customer number, (877) 430-6768. E-mail: ARG@beachlink.com. Web site: www.alligatorrivergrowers.com

How to find it fresh from the farm

The N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has made it easier for you to find produce fresh from the field, or to pick berries or cut Christmas trees. The new Web site called North Carolina Farm Fresh contains a directory of pick-your-own farms, roadside farm markets and farmers markets from the mountains to the coast. The site can also help you find in-season, locally grown fruits, vegetables, trees, ornamental plants, flowers and herbs. The directory ranges from apples and honey to pumpkins and pine needles. Many markets offer hayrides, holiday shows, cornfield mazes and tours. You may sign up for e-mail updates about fresh product availability, too. Check out the site at www.ncfarmfresh.com.

Mattamuskeet Sweet Onion Recipe

This was the Grand Prize Winner of the Mattamuskeet Sweet Onion Recipe Contest sponsored last year by Tideland Electric and Carolina Country magazine.

Homemade Salsa

Delia C. Mooney
Fairfield, NC

2 gallons tomatoes (peeled, chopped)
5 pounds Mattamuskeet sweet onions (peeled, chopped)
2 pounds green bell pepper (chopped)
3 tablespoons salt
1 cup sugar
1 cup vinegar
2 tablespoons garlic
1 gallon silver queen corn (cut off cob)
½ cup hot sauce

Wash all ingredients first. Peel the tomatoes and chop. Peel the Mattamuskeet Sweet onions and chop, then add to the tomatoes, chopped bell pepper, salt, sugar, vinegar, garlic, corn and hot sauce. Cook all ingredients until done, about 1 hour, stirring often. A red acid will rise to the top; skim off the bubbles and discard. Mixture should be thick. Cool if you plan to serve immediately. Serve with chips. Makes enough for a party.