

A TRADITIONAL APPROACH YIELDS a successful harvest

DELAWARE POTATO GROWER CHAD PRIES STILL USES MANY OF THE SAME PLANTING AND HARVESTING TECHNIQUES HIS FATHER AND UNCLE TAUGHT HIM WHEN HE WAS A TEENAGER. THAT TRADITIONAL APPROACH AND A RESPECT FOR THE LAND ARE THE FOUNDATION OF CHAD'S ONGOING SUCCESS IN A HIGHLY COMPETITIVE MARKET.



STORY BY SUSAN WALKER, PHOTOS BY SUSAN WALKER, KATIE WARD AND JODI PRIES | FROM GPS-GUIDED PLANTING SYSTEMS TO AUTOMATED SOIL SAMPLERS AND OPTICAL SENSORS DESIGNED TO MEASURE THE HEALTH OF PLANTS, FARMERS HAVE A GROWING NUMBER OF HIGH-TECH TOOLS AT THEIR DISPOSAL. AND WHILE THESE TOOLS CAN BE VERY HELPFUL, CHAD PRIES STILL USES AND VALUES MANY OF THE TRADITIONAL FARMING METHODS HIS FATHER AND UNCLE TAUGHT HIM.

Chad, who started working on his family's potato farm near Dover Air Force Base in Delaware when he was a teenager, currently has 800 acres in Felton, Delaware tilled, with 70 of those acres making up the home farm he purchased in 2002. His primary crop is the same one his family has always grown, round white potatoes, although he also grows corn and beans as part of summer production.

"We're growing potatoes with an approach that's very similar to what my

father, Sandy Pries, and uncle, Francis Bergold, did a generation ago." Chad explains. "Not a lot has changed, and we've always been very successful with that approach. Up until last year, I used the same seed cutter and planter my uncle used in the 1970s. Potato equipment is very specialized and overall it hasn't really changed as much as it has for grain farmers. We still use four-row planters. It's a labor-intensive process. I still believe in the old way of thinking—you need to take care of the ground and build up the soil.

You leave the straw and the corn fodder on the soil. Don't get on it when it's wet. Over the years, if you take care of the soil, that's a tremendous help to growing a good crop."

While the equipment used to plant and harvest potatoes hasn't changed a great deal, the market in Delaware certainly has. As recent as 20 years ago, there were once 15 growers with 7,000 acres of potatoes planted. That number has dropped to just six growers with 1,200 acres planted. Chad adds, "Potatoes



are not an easy game. You're always fighting the weather and the markets. You're producing a perishable crop in a finite market, so if Florida and other southern growers get started planting late because of weather, the market could be flooded when potatoes in Delaware are ready to go to market. You have to fight for every inch in this business."

Chad also has to contend with fickle spring weather when trying to get his crop into the ground. The wrong combination of rain and heat or cold can damage the growing potatoes, significantly cutting into yields. Despite the challenges that potatoes present, Chad has no interest in switching to a different crop and plans to continue his

family's legacy.

"I couldn't do what I do without my father's advice and help on the farm. I have a ton of respect for my father and uncle's generation," Chad says. "They worked their tails off. They were good farmers. They took care of the ground. I learned more from the older guys and working hands-on on the farm than I did in my classes in college. Nothing takes the place of experience out in those fields."

While Chad isn't looking for the next big thing in potato planting or packing equipment, he is thinking to the future. "If there's something that makes my work more efficient and helps produce a better product, I will adopt it," he says. "For example, we built a packing shed on the

home farm. Producing a quality product is the most important thing for me. If you keep producing the best quality, buyers come back to you year after year. When the trucks are loaded with my potatoes, it's a very satisfying feeling. But you have to be all in to be successful. You can't dictate the weather or the markets, so you have to do the best job with the things you can control. If you grow a healthy, strong plant and the weather turns, you're going to fare better than someone who's created an average product to begin with. As farmers, we all work hard. One thing I learned from my father and uncle is that the hard work pays off. It might not pay off right away, but it does pay off." ●