MADISON COUNTY
Heart of Muck Lands
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Man has used them for centuries in everything from soups to aphrodisiacs.
They go great on hamburgers or in salads and have been known to make women cry.
What are they? — onions!

YOU MIGHT HAVE KNOWN that onions are a member of the lily family, but did you know that New York State is one of the largest producers of onions in the world?
New York is one of the few states to have rich muck soil in which onions thrive. Scattered sections of muck soil occur in seven of the state's 57 counties—Genesee, Orleans, Oswego, Steuben, Yates, Wayne and Madison.
They are available year round and seem plentiful, but there are numerous problems confronting the onion grower, most notably the capriciousness of nature.

THE VILLAGE OF CANASTOTA, about 30 miles from Utica in Madison County, is the heart of the muck lands.
Richard Ackerman, a county cooperative extension agent, discussed the muck soil around Canastota as we drove out to the farmlands owned by James Sgroi, a farmer for the last 30 years.
Ackerman said that muck soil is derived from organic materials — partially decomposed plant fibers — which were compressed thousands of years ago when a glacier covered the area.
He said that onions grow well in the soil because of its water holding properties, but by the same token water and poor drainage facilities have caused delays in developing the muck lands.

ACKERMAN SAID that when the Erie Canal was put through in 1835, it was the first time the land had adequate drainage and agriculture started to flourish in the area.
He said that in 1860 growers lost about $120,000 because of flooding. After that a watershed, with a system of ditches, was completed.

ACKERMAN said that onions are very responsive to day light. “Most of the onions grown in the Canastota area are the long day onion varieties which thrive in the 38-40 degree latitude,” he said.
“We can’t grow some of the shorter (quicker growing time) varieties because they won’t bulb until the day length gets to 15 hours,” he said.

ANOTHER PROBLEM is wind erosion — muck soil is amazingly light.
“The cost of raising a crop of onions is very expensive,” Ackerman said. “It runs about $500 an acre. You have to consider the water and wind. The small plants, although tough, are hurt by too much cold or too hot and humid weather.”
“It’s a risky business. There was a hail storm here last year, which stripped the leaves right off the young plants. They couldn’t be marketed because they were too small,” Ackerman said.

JIM SGROI lives in Canastota and drives out to his plot of muck land each day. Most of the farmers in the area live in the village and drive to their land.
Sgroi describes himself as a “small grower” with about 40 acres of onions. “The trend is toward larger farms,” Sgroi said. “I’m now working the same acreage that six families worked — 120 acres.”
“You can’t raise enough of one crop to make it worthwhile if you’re small,” he added.
Sgroi said that he usually plants his onions in mid-April. “For about a month you have your heart in your mouth because of wind and weather. We can get a two-inch down pour all at once that could ruin a crop. We have to use snow fences to help prevent wind erosion,” he said.

“ONCE THROUGH THAT PERIOD it’s generally smooth sailing,” Sgroi said. “Providing you’ve sprayed. Then you worry about insects and diseases that the plants are subject too. Weeds are no problem any more because of chemical herbicides. If we didn’t use herbicides it would be almost impossible to operate — the cost per acre would drive us out of business,” Sgroi said.
“You lose money if you can’t mechanize, that’s why onions are an expensive crop — there’s a lot of handling which raises your costs. If I had to pay

RICH, BLACK FIELDS OF MUCK LAND

produce some of nation’s best onions

USES FORKLIFT TO LOAD TRUCKS

with early onions to be shipped to market
weeders and still try to operate on the small scale that I do. I couldn't afford it," Sgroi said.

"Weather is perhaps your biggest problem. I could be the best farmer in the world, working the best land and get ruined.

In 10 minutes I lost $10,000 on the July hail storm. That storm took about 30 per cent of my crop. Some of my neighbors suffered a complete crop loss and some weren't hurt," he said.

HOW SOON CAN YOU PLANT the onions? "As soon as you can work the ground early in mid-April," Sgroi said.

Most farmers grow their own seed. Each year a certain amount is set aside for this purpose. The seeds are sown thick and close together so they don't get too big. When they mature they are undercut and pulled into wind rows to dry. Then they are screened and boxed," Sgroi said.

These small onions are known as sets and if you've ever raised your own in a back yard garden you probably used sets," he said.

Ackerman said that the first year the farmer used seed to raise sets that would be used the following year for a crop. Some farmers grow a large amount of sets to sell to such distributors as Agway, which in turn markets them to other growers — usually the back yard garden type.

MARKETING IS ANOTHER AREA with which the grower has to contend. "Marketing has changed as much as growing. There used to be more than 1,000 outlets in the area now there are just a few chains. A few years ago you could always sell a little off grade to a small grocer or outlet. Today a grower can raise a half decent crop but can't market them if they're not grade one," Sgroi said.

"I sell right off the fields. I raise the early variety — Ebenezer sets and early yellow globes and the new hybrids which bulb later, are harder and store better," Sgroi said.

Asked about spraying and DDT, Sgroi said: "DDT hasn't been used in I don't know how many years. We do use chemical herbicides to fight onion maggot and smut and the other fungus diseases onions are subject to. We have no choice but to spray. People would starve if they were banned for one year," Sgroi said.

"A good yield usually runs about 700 to 800 bushels an acre. Sometimes you can get as much as 1,000 bushels an acre," Sgroi said.

 Asked what a good price would be, Sgroi said: "It depends on the yield and the market. I'm very happy with $8,000 or $9,000 above my expenses. Sometimes I get nothing — sometimes more."

One surprise was the fact that the much lands can be depleted. Ackerman said that the much around Canastota is shallow about 4 to 7 feet deep. Places in Oswego and Orange counties, the soil runs to 25 feet deep.

SGROI SAID: "Probably all it will take is another 30 to 40 years. We lose half-an-inch a year because of decomposing and another inch because of the weather.

"It's not like an upland farm that you can work for 200 to 300 years. Many parts around here are just about all worked out. In 30 years there won't be any onions and potatoes grown here," Sgroi said.

According to the State Department of Commerce onions are "unique among vegetable crops. They have a worldwide market and are an integral part of the cuisine on every continent. New York onions are exported primarily to the Caribbean area. They also find their way to many countries of Europe deficient in much lands."

The report also points out some interesting health values. It says: "Recent medical investigations seem to show that onions somehow raise the body's capacity to dissolve internal blood clots — a major cause of heart attacks."

"One onion contains as much vitamin C as two apples, one orange or one tomato. They are a valuable source of several minerals important to health — calcium, phosphorus and iron — and one pound contains only 220 calories, making them useful to a weight maintenance regime."

In closing, we mentioned their use as an aphrodisiac. This is attributed to French noblemen in the 1600s. However, reports indicate that the only thing it made stronger was their breath.