



HEALTHY GROWN MEETS CURRENT SUSTAINABILITY DEMAND

Potato growers stress that retail customers and consumers care about food origins

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

"The Wisconsin Healthy Grown program brings awareness to what we as potato farmers do every day to be stewards of the land," says Christine Lindner, marketing manager for Alsum Farms & Produce.

"It creates a brand for eco-friendly Wisconsin grown potatoes and communicates our commitment to consumers that they are getting a product that is grown in a sustainable manner," she stresses.

Alsum Farms has been a part of the Healthy Grown program since

18 BC'T April

its inception, in 1996. The grower, shipper and packer from Friesland, Wisconsin, highlights the Healthy Grown program and commitment to sustainable farming in its marketing messages to customers.

"We have also utilized the Healthy Grown promotional and merchandising materials to help educate Wisconsin consumers and elevate sales at retail," Lindner explains.

She says, fundamentally, one of greatest benefits of Healthy Grown

Above: Potatoes are harvested on Wysocki Produce Farm. *Photo courtesy of Mark Weinhold, Harmann Studios*

is it gives potato farmers a cohesive stewardship story to tell business partners and government officials at state and local levels.

The Healthy Grown program provides a framework and formalized way to capture what many potato growers are already doing.

As more customers implement "Corporate Responsibility" initiatives, they look to their partner suppliers, Lindner details, for formalized Integrated Pest Management (IPM) plans, and pollinator and sustainability programs that are being conducted on farms.

CORRELATES WITH IPM PLANS

Rod Gumz of Gumz Muck Farms, Endeavor, Wisconsin, says, "Healthy



Grown makes us put on paper what we are already doing with our IPM plans.”

“I feel relationships with neighbors, community leaders and legislators are important,” Gumz adds. “Laws and regulations can make producing the crop difficult and costly.”

“Healthy Grown is a standard that portrays a positive perception of agriculture,” he reasons. “For me, it does not help sell the crop. I feel it helps me produce the crop.”

Alsum Farms & Produce is committed to using responsible growing and handling practices to produce the freshest quality potatoes while reducing its environmental footprint.

“We hill potatoes in rows to create the ideal growing environment. Our scout carefully inspects the fields and recommends the use of pesticides when necessary,” Lindner says.



A proud grower of Healthy Grown potatoes and onions (shown here), Rod Gumz of Gumz Muck Farms says he doesn’t want to lose the empathy many people have towards hardworking farmers who provide food for the world. “We have to portray agriculture in the best light in order to continue doing what we are doing,” Gumz says.

“When we do use crop protection products, we spray low to the ground, making it safer for employees and as environmentally friendly as possible,” she states.

Minimum tillage and soil conservation practices help round out Alsum Farms’ commitment to the environment.

“We use irrigation only when necessary to conserve water.

At the production facility, our water recycling program is an example of our commitment to the environment,” Lindner says.

APPLYING PRACTICES

“We are committed to applying Healthy Grown practices on all planted acreage on our farm,” she notes.

In the early 1990’s, the Wisconsin

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Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) and the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison began looking at ways to advance the industry's conservation and sustainability standards.

In 1996, the WPVGA partnered with the World Wildlife Fund and later joined forces with the International

Crane Foundation and the Defenders of Wildlife to establish the Wisconsin Eco-Potato partnership.

The result was a new brand launched, in 2002, and a sustainable standard for growing potatoes—Healthy Grown.

"The Wisconsin Healthy Grown

Above: Shown are an Alsum Farms potato field nearing full bloom, in Arena, Wisconsin, and a pollinator project and Healthy Grown sign at the farm. *Potato field photo courtesy of Beau Hartline, Alsum Farms & Produce*

program is designed by growers, ecologists and conservationists to meet consumer demand for products that restore and conserve the lands we farm," states Tim Huffcutt, vice president of sales and marketing operations for RPE, Inc., Bancroft, Wisconsin, the marketing arm of Wysocki Family of Companies.

Healthy Grown, he points out, uses less-invasive ways to manage pests and plants while restoring natural ecosystems, preventing erosion, supporting native plants and animals and conserving water.

"By supporting participating farmers in the Healthy Grown program, customers show that they care about the same things their shoppers care about—the people and the land," Huffcutt stresses.

SUSTAINABILITY VISIONS

To Huffcutt, the Wisconsin Healthy Grown program directly meets customers' sustainability visions and

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goals by restoring and conserving resources in a measurable and visible way.

"The brand symbolizes the farmers' commitment to hold themselves to a higher, certified standard for land use," he says.

"The key," Huffcutt notes, "is to simplify the story and message for customers and consumers alike. Now more than ever, people want to understand the origin of the food they are feeding their families."

"Shoppers care about the back stories involving farmers' responsible growing practices, including water and land management," he says.

Much of what Wisconsin farmers and the UW Extension office developed 20-plus years ago provided the basics, Huffcutt details, for the Potato



Sustainability Alliance, an initiative that launched in 2009.

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Potatoes are checked mid-season at Wysocki Produce Farm. Photo courtesy of Brett Sommers

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"Our Healthy Grown program was perhaps 10 years ahead of its time and is now the kind of documented responsible farming practices routinely expected by retail customers and their suppliers," he says.

Huffcutt mentions some of the catch phrases and practices that

have become expected by retailers: audit readiness, product traceability, regulatory compliance and social responsibility, among others.

MODEL FOR GROWERS

In addition, he notes, the cooperation between the UW Extension office and Wisconsin farmers is a decades-long partnership that continues to serve

as a model for growers and land-grant universities in other areas of the country.

Huffcutt adds that Wysocki Produce Farm and RPE, Inc. have partnered with and hired researchers in the Healthy Grown program.

Lindner says Alsum Farms & Produce similarly values the role researchers play in the program.

"We are fortunate to have a great relationship and partnership with the UW Extension staff and they provide excellent support and are always looking to improve our best practices as farmers and environmentalists," Lindner remarks.

"As farmers, we understand that the land we farm is the source of life, food and jobs," she stresses, "and it is our responsibility and opportunity to preserve and care for the land and environment."

Healthy Grown opens dialogue and promotes good neighbor and community relations with local citizens who see participating farmers' commitments to land stewardship.

Lindner says she believes the Healthy Grown brand could be a greater point of differentiation in the marketplace if most of Wisconsin's fresh potato acres were certified under the program.

PROGRAM ADOPTION

"Alsum Farms is one of the original members of the group that created Healthy Grown," she states. "We encourage other Wisconsin potato growers to adopt the program."

Huffcutt adds that it is important to sell the program to more than just the grower and buyer. "Sell the program as a partner in the retailer's success in meeting the needs of their shoppers first," he suggests.

"Make sure to share the message

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Why Growers Should Be Part of the Wisconsin Healthy Grown® Program

The Wisconsin Healthy Grown® program works to advance growers' use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to efficiently manage inputs, and enhance ecosystem conservation efforts by certifying under the Healthy Grown® potato, onion and carrot standards. Healthy Grown standards promote agricultural sustainability and enhance environmental farming systems. This helps to position Wisconsin growers to capture the expanding consumer demand for sustainably grown produce in the marketplace.

Healthy Grown® Grower Benefits

- Increased public recognition and public relations on local and national levels
- New practice adoption leading to long-term risk avoidance of regulation and food safety audits
- Direct educational interactions and knowledge transfer working with University of Wisconsin-Madison faculty
- Improved and streamlined documentation for supply chain sustainability requirements
- Ability to promote direct farm and regional benefits to neighbors, local communities and marketing of farm(s)
- Enriched personnel ethic of environmental stewardship sustainability and land management to help with messaging of changing farm landscape
- Encourages better market perception and advantage in marketplace

The entire industry benefits from the ecologically sound program and positive aspects of Healthy Grown®.

The scope of the program fits markets looking for food grown under systems with key criteria for sustainability – including new terms such as resilient agriculture, food security, healthy and sound ecosystems, green production systems, stewardship and regenerative production systems.

Healthy Grown® Certification Requirements

- **Healthy Grown Standard assessment:** Includes multiple sections of farm and production management, IPM details, records and sustainability measurement assessments.
- **IPM Planning Protocol Form:** Specific details related to their integrated weed, disease, and insect management programs. Plan reviewed by UW-Extension specialists (Jed Colquhoun, Russ Groves and Amanda Gevens).
- **Long-Term and Annual Ecological Restoration Plans:** Work with ecology specialists to prioritize conservation actions on their privately owned, non-agricultural land.



Healthy Grown® encourages education between growers and University of Wisconsin – Madison specialists. This individualized interaction and educational process has proven to be very successful and valuable to the industry. Growers are able to store documents in an online portal which simplifies certification in future years. Growers receive help in filling out forms and finalizing documentation needs.

For more information, contact: Deana Knuteson, UW-Madison Nutrient and Pest Management Program (dknuteson@wisc.edu, 608-347-8236)

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with produce directors, category managers and marketers within your partner organization to ensure a greater level of success,” Huffcutt emphasizes.

Gumz agrees, adding, “I am not sure that the goal of the program should be premium sales anymore, but instead keeping farmers and agriculture in a positive light.”

“The younger generations look at things differently,” Gumz remarks. “Many have no ties to agriculture. I don’t want to lose the empathy many people have towards the hardworking farmers that provide food for the world.”

“We have to portray agriculture in the best light in order to continue doing what we are doing,” he says. “Perception influences who wants

to work for you, who your customers are and who writes and enforces the laws that affect growers.”

Gumz concludes, “Being part of Healthy Grown is a tool that helps communicate to everyone that we are good farmers and good stewards of the land.”

“As farmers, we understand that the land we farm is the source of life, food and jobs. It is our responsibility and opportunity to preserve and care for the land and environment.”

– Christine Lindner,
Alsum Farms & Produce

*If you are interested in certifying your potatoes, onions or carrots, sign up now and review the updated Healthy Grown standard and certification process. For details, contact Julie Braun and the WPVGA office, jbraun@wisconsinpotatoes.com or 715-623-7683. **BCT***

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