NUTRITION

Labor Shortage Hits Sugar

Beet-raising farmers unwilling to put in more than two-thirds of acreage they planned to plant. Beet field hands can't be hired with jobs in war plants available.

➤ SUGAR-MAKING, which ought to be the sweetest job in the world, is always running into something sour. This year it's the unwillingness of the beet-raising farmers to put in more than two-thirds of the million acres they had expected to plant. Since about a third of our national sugar supply comes from domestically raised beets, this means a reduction of roughly 10% in the sugar we'll have next year—unless the shipping situation improves to the point where more cane sugar can be brought in from the tropics.

Labor shortage is primarily to blame for the situation. There is a great deal of "stoop labor" involved in raising beets, and since high-wage war-industry plants have sprung up in practically every beet-raising area in the country, beet-field hands simply aren't to be hired.

Department of Agriculture officials are less worried than the sugar manufacturers. They point out that the acres that will not raise beets this year will be in other crops, all of them needed by the armed forces and by workers on the home front. Indicated replacement crops are mainly potatoes, beans and alfalfa—the latter, of course, to become meat and milk, via the farmyard feed rack.

This labor shortage trouble crops up just as the beet-sugar industry had been helped out of another bad fix—a threatened shortage of seed. Thanks to the plant breeders of the Department of Agriculture and state experiment stations, we have become independent of European beet-seed growers, as we are becoming independent of foreign garden-seed growers.

The story of American sugar-beet seed development is told by Dr. G. H. Coons of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. There is a good deal of drama in it—and more than a good deal of hard use of scientific brains.

Prior to the first World War, although we had something over two-thirds of a million acres in sugar-beet production, we relied entirely on European growers for seed. They had the experience, also cheaper labor, so that seemed the best thing to do.

That war taught us some hard lessons. There had to be long and anxious negotiations, to get even a trickle of seed through from blockaded Germany. We even had to put up a bond to make a return shipment of the empty gunny-sacks!

At the same time, American sugar-beet fields were under a destructive dual attack here at home. In the West, beets were literally curling up and quitting, under the scourge of a virus disease called curly-top, which crippled their leaves and made them unable to manufacture sugar in the normal way. In the East, there was an almost equally destructive disease called leaf-spot, caused by a fungus.

To meet these and other threats to the Great American Sugar-Bowl, plant scientists of the Department of Agriculture and the agricultural experiment stations of sugar-beet producing states went to work to develop disease-resistant strains, and to introduce them into cultivation.

They succeeded in producing the kinds of new sugar beets they were after. No one strain is good for the whole country, for the curly-top-resistant kind good for Western conditions is not immune to the leaf-spot prevalent in the East. Conversely, the leaf-spot-resistant variety cannot stand up to curly-top in the West. There are also special strains fitted for local conditions of soil and climate, that are not good outside their particular areas.

In the West, partly as a result of insistence by the scientists who worked out the new varieties, home production of seed was undertaken during the 1930's, so that the region as a whole was little disturbed by the cutting off of beet seed imports by the second World War.

Growers in the East had let the job of seed production slip back into the hands of European growers, until the total beet seed imports had climbed to around 15,000,000 pounds in 1937, as compared with 13,000,000 pounds grown in the United States—principally in and for the Western fields.

Imports slumped heavily during the first part of the war, though substantial quantities still came in until 1941, since when practically no seed has been received from abroad. Domestically produced seed, however, after a slump from well over 13,000,000 pounds in 1938 and 1939 to not much more than half that in 1940, has now gone up to the hitherto unapproached peak of 18,000,000 pounds.

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Iridium, a rare metal used in alloy to harden platinum, is now restricted by the government and may be used only in electric contact points, fuse wire for detonators, electric primers, and laboratory ware.