



JOE CHITWOOD

Yuma County

Keeping Up With the Winter Vegetable Market

By Lorraine B. Kingdon



Take a close look at the vegetables growing in Yuma County this year. Notice any differences?

Forward-looking Yuma vegetable growers have made a fast change in response to a new market that opened up a couple of years ago.

So, you'll see more acres of leaf lettuce—green and red—Romaine, Boston lettuce, Bok Choy, escarole and Napa (Chinese cabbage). Tucked here and there among larger fields of lettuce

are small plantings of daikon radishes, radicio, rapini and purple and green kohlrabi.

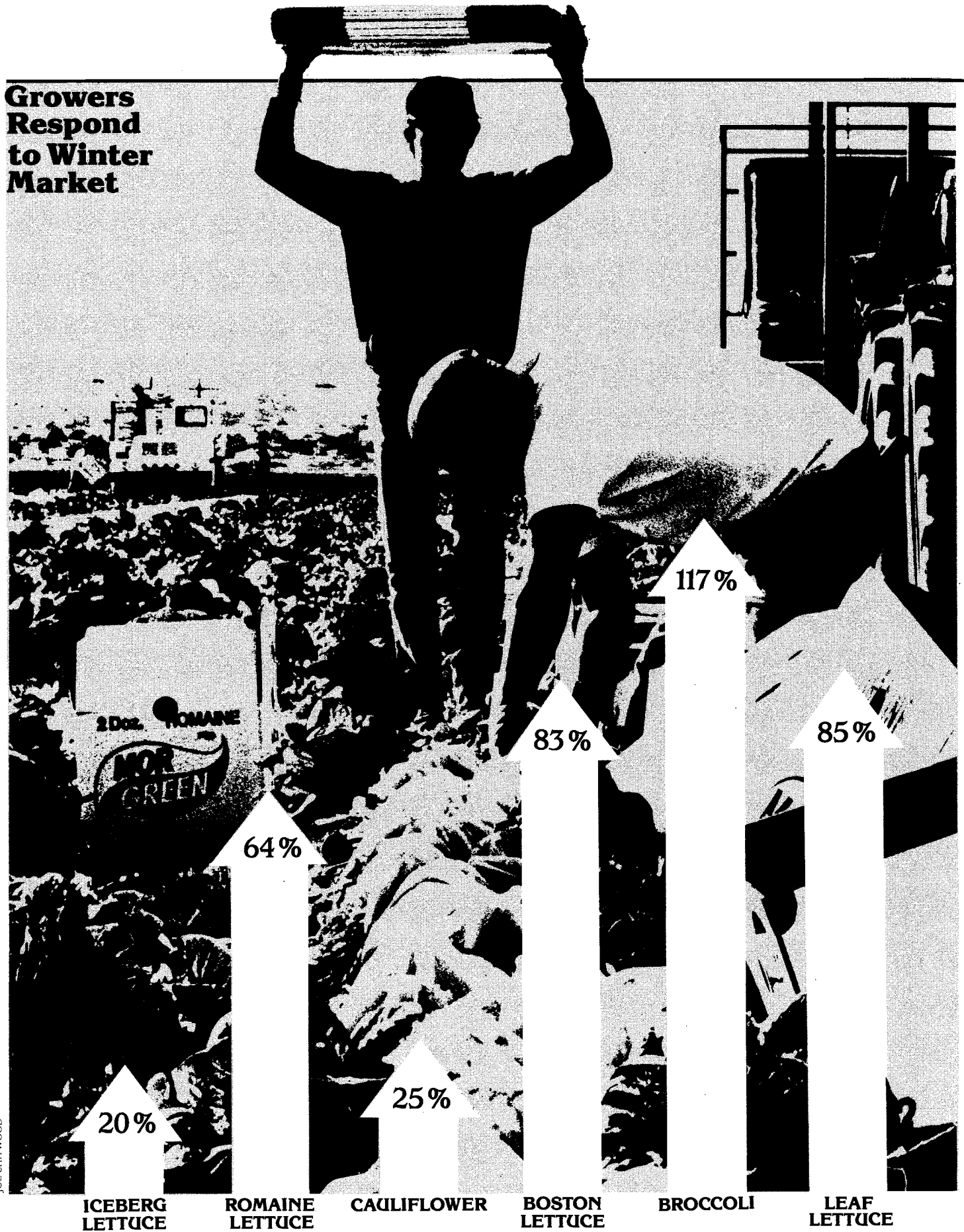
Grower Bob Meiser sums up the reason for growing the new crops in three words, "Demand is up." He believes buyers realized that Yuma County growers could supply top-quality vegetables for the winter market.

The response was fast. Within a year after the market developed, ap-

proximately one-third of the county's commercial vegetable growers added new crops.

Marvin Butler points to another reason for the large increase in acreage of "minor" vegetable crops. The UA Yuma County agricultural agent says buyers now want mixed loads. Supermarket managers prefer to purchase one or two cartons of radishes, for example, along with a larger amount of head lettuce.

Growers Respond to Winter Market



JOE CHITWOOD

Head or iceberg lettuce is still the largest vegetable crop in the area, Butler says. In 1986, 21,300 acres were planted by October 15, an increase of 20 percent from the previous year.

Broccoli is now planted on 1,500 acres, a 117 percent increase, while 4,500 acres of cauliflower represents a 25 percent increase.

Comparing the acres of minor vegetables planted by October 15 to plantings of a year earlier, 550 acres of leaf lettuce represents an 85 percent increase. Romaine acreage is up 64 percent to 350 acres and Boston lettuce now is planted on 120 acres, an increase of 83 percent.

Acreages of Bok Choy, escarole and Napa also have gone up dramatically although the size of the plantings in each case is below 100 acres. And for the first time in the Yuma area, growers are raising such exotics as daikon radishes, radicio, rapini and kohlrabi.

Growers have other problems to contend with in addition to the market, says Butler. It's more difficult to grow and harvest small acreages of several crops rather than an entire field of one vegetable.

Most minor crops lack registered herbicides to control weeds; the vegetables must be weeded entirely by hand or by mechanical means. Registered pesticides for insect control are few, yet minor vegetables suffer from most of the same pests as head lettuce.

Predicting the vegetable market always has been a risky business; even the most expert crystal ball can fail three years out of five, sometimes even oftener, says Dr. Norman Oebker, UA Extension vegetables specialist. Perhaps that's how growers learn to jump quickly when a new market trend seems to show up.

There's always a danger of too

many growers jumping on the same bandwagon at the same time. Meiser believes that already may have happened to the boom in minor vegetables over the past three or four years. He thinks next year's Napa acreage may go down, for example, because the supply has outstripped demand.


The market price to the grower can change from one day to the next. In mid-January, for example, cool, windy weather hit Yuma and the price of Napa went up because less was being picked. As Meiser explained it, "The demand was steady, but the supply went down."

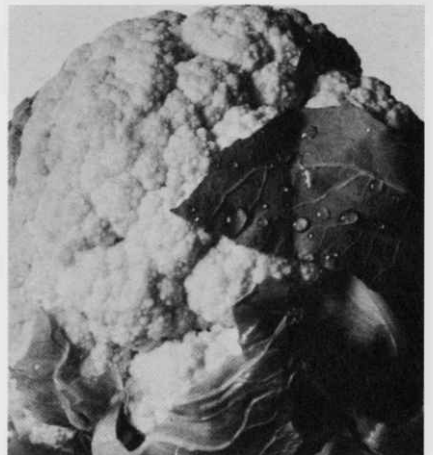
Vegetables picked today in Yuma could be on supermarket produce counters in Phoenix tomorrow, or they could be in New York City three days later. Yuma produce does go all the way to the East Coast, Meiser says.

The vegetables are all hand-harvested, Butler says. Often custom harvest crews specialize in one of two particular vegetables, such as Napa and Bok Choy. Watch them; it's obvious, they know their job.

Cutters with long, sharp knives walk the rows, cutting each head just above the ground, quickly removing yellowed base-leaves and putting the heads upside down in a row.

They're followed closely by men who pack the Napa into boxes, 12 heads to a box. Others bring boxes from the trailer-truck, shake them open and put them into just the right position to be filled.

Finally, the boxes are stapled shut and loaded onto a truck and taken to a brief cold storage before being shipped to supermarkets all over the country. As many as 300 trucks per day leave Yuma during the winter vegetable harvest, perhaps...taking Boston lettuce to Boston. 



PHOTOS BY LYNN KETCHUM

(left) In many cases, plantings of minor vegetables in Yuma County soared in 1986.