

# *An industry in ferment—* Cucumber Pickles in Arizona

*by Fred C. Harper\**

Fortunetellers may find the future in a crystal ball, but judging from recent developments on the local and national scene, some Arizona vegetable growers will find it in a pickle jar.

Within the past two years, a number of nationally known pickle processing firms have become very interested in Arizona, both as a source of raw products and as a potential site for a processing plant.

In 1973, only about 100 acres of cucumber pickles were grown in the state. Last year, that figure increased to 800 acres, and contracts have already been negotiated for at least 2,000 acres in 1975, with the possibility of more a distinct likelihood.

One company spokesman foresees his firm providing a market for over 2,000 acres of cucumbers within the next few years if current plans materialize.

Why the sudden interest in Arizona? There are a number of reasons.

First and perhaps foremost, pickle processing firms need more cucumbers and other raw products. The per capita consumption of pickle products has increased steadily over the past 10 or 15 years. At the present time, cucumber pickles rank third among all processed vegetables, with a per capita consumption of 8 pounds in 1973.

It is interesting to note that during the past decade per capita consumption as well as total consumption of processed vegetables has increased

while fresh market consumption has declined.

Several other factors have helped to stimulate interest in Arizona. This includes an increased demand for "overnight dills" and other types of fresh packed pickles. As a result, processors need a greater supply of raw product on a day-to-day basis for quick processing and delivery to market.

Also, new developments in the pickling process make it possible to produce a satisfactory "old-fashioned dill" in a matter of a few days to a few weeks, instead of six to eight months as before.

At one time, a large percentage of the pickle pack was brought in from the field, graded, and placed into brine to ferment for several months before final processing and shipment to market. Now, in an effort to increase production efficiency and cut down on product inventory, many processors are seeking sources of raw product which will permit them to operate on a year-around basis, thus eliminating the need for storage.

**Growing cucumbers for the pickle processing market is a specialty crop demanding specific expertise. John Seitz (left), a Litchfield Park area grower, inspects last fall's crop with author Fred Harper of UA's Mesa farm.**



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**This "cuke" harvester works an 80 foot wide swath at a one acre-per-hour average. A rear blade cuts vines; "fingers" pull vines onto belts which separate vegetables and drop them into holding bin. Vines are blown back to the soil.**

That apparently is where Arizona fits into the picture. The state's climate makes it one of four areas in the country where cucumbers and other vegetables used in processing can be obtained in the so-called off-season periods of April, May, June, September, October and November.

Historically, processors have sought to locate their plants close to their market, rather than close to their source of raw product. This is because on the average it costs them about twice as much to transport the finished product to market as it does to transport the raw product to the plant.

Some processors currently are hauling fresh cucumbers and other raw products as far as 1,300 miles. Thus Arizona is regarded as being relatively nearby to those processing plants serving Los Angeles and other large western markets.

At the same time, Arizona in its own right in recent years has developed into a fairly large market, worthy of the attention of nationally known processors. This has helped to stimulate interest in the possibility of open-

ing up processing facilities in the state.

Also, processors have found that the fermentation process involved in pickling can be completed faster and with a more satisfactory end product at the high temperatures normally associated with the desert southwest.

Needless to say, interest on the part of the processor would be to no avail without a corresponding interest on the part of the grower. In the latter case, the development and introduction of the mechanical cucumber harvester has played a major part.

The current farm-labor picture makes hand harvest of cucumbers and other pickling products almost unthinkable. At the same time, the harvesters that have been developed will pick the vines as clean as hand harvesters, and at a much lower cost.

Since cucumbers are a short-term crop (45-75 days from planting to harvest) they can be fitted easily into a rotation plan with other crops. For example, early spring pickles could be followed by cotton, while a fall crop of pickles could follow sugar-

beets, cereal grain, safflower, lettuce or onions.

Processors are interested in several other crops for pickling which can be grown satisfactorily in Arizona. These include chili and bell peppers, green tomatoes, okra, cauliflower, cabbage, boiler-size onions, carrots and cocktail corn.

In most cases, these crops as well as cucumbers are grown under contract, meaning that growers should have no trouble arranging for the financing involved.

Although some kinks still need to be ironed out, so far as production and management practices are concerned, it seems apparent that cucumbers will do well in the state.

By putting a portion of their production into the pickle jar, the vegetable industry could enjoy a greater degree of stability and diversification than it now has.

In time, who knows, the lowly cucumber may take its place beside cotton, copper, cattle and climate as one of the big "C's" in Arizona economy.