

Challenges in Introducing a New Crop Enterprise: Asparagus in Lithuania

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After restoring Lithuania's independence in 1991, original owners or their families were able to regain possession of the property subsumed by the Soviet Union. Such was the case with Vytautas Sliupas, son of famous Lithuanian author and activist. Mr. Sliupas is curator of his father's archives that he has donated to Siauliai University in Siauliai, Lithuania. He obtained possession of his grandfather's farm near Kursenai and decided to dedicate it to the support of small-holding farmers of Lithuania as a research and demonstration center. This 140-ha farm has both arable and forest lands. Mr. Sliupas, a resident of Burlingame, California, USA, recruited a small group to assess the potential of developing an effective center on this farm. On-site review and extensive discussions with local farmers and officials were positive and the little California group decided to start the development process. The initial survey was done in 1997² L. Clement, a University of California Cooperative Extension worker, did initial soil surveys and began planting demonstration crops that may have potential for economic value to small farmers. A nonprofit California foundation, The Auksuciai Foundation, was formed for purposes of soliciting funds from donors --'friends of Lithuania'-- in the USA to finance the development operations in Lithuania. After the initial field studies, a legal organization was formed in Lithuania, the Auksuciai Farm and Forestry Center [AUMC], as a base for operations at the Sliupas farm. AUMC is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of one-half Lithuanian residents and one-half from the USA. Mr. Sliupas built a house that served as the operations headquarters and living quarters for staff. Later, a significant donation was received from Mrs. G. Liautaud of Chicago that was used to construct an office, dormitory, and conference center. This was named in honor of her father, a forestry graduate in Lithuania, as the Gudaitis Center. About 5 ha of the farm are used for field and horticultural crop research and about 100 ha are leased to a local farmer for general crop production, mainly wheat and canola. This provides income for the AUMC operations. Forest products are harvested as well for additional income to support the development activities.

By 2004 five years of field research had been completed with some 25 crops and numerous varieties of each. An emphasis was placed on identification of crops not in current production in Lithuania as well as testing of new varieties of Lithuania's traditional crops. One plant seemed especially attractive for the small farmers of Lithuania. That was asparagus. While it is an important specialty crop

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² Clement, L., C.O. Qualset, and L. Ruth. 1997. The Jonas Sliupas Foundation for Lithuanian agricultural development: An assessment and proposal. Consulting Report 15 p.

in Europe and many other areas of the world, the Lithuanians had not grown it as commercial enterprise and consumption was limited, being based on imported asparagus from as far away as Peru, South America. Field plots were established and harvested for four consecutive seasons with yield consistent with productivity in other countries. Five hybrid varieties were introduced from California and all were satisfactory. Samples were taken to local restaurants and to individuals for 'taste-testing'. Consumers were enthusiastic, giving encouragement for AUMC to expand its efforts to introduce asparagus to local farmers.

A public information activity was started in 2004 with a conference and field day³. Attendees were local government officials, representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, scientists and administrators from the Agricultural University in Kaunas and the University of Siauliai, along with local farmers. A second seminar was held at the AUMC center in 2008 to inaugurate the 'launching of asparagus in Lithuania'. At this seminar more farmers were present to learn about the potential of asparagus as a new enterprise on their farms. The seminar featured a famous chef from Riga, Latvia, Martins Ritins of the Vincents Restaurant. He provided historical and dietary significance of asparagus and prepared several asparagus dishes for the farmers and spouses to sample. A main outcome of this event was the recommendation that a Lithuanian Asparagus Growers Association be formed to aid in production, processing, and marketing of the crop from their farms. The interested farmers were each provided about 1,000 seedlings from AUMC to plant on their land.

Thus, during the remainder of 2008 efforts were made to create the growers' association. The Village Innovations Association was finalized in April 2009 with four growers as founding members. The association is initially dedicated to asparagus, but can expand to other commodities and activities in the future. AUMC will provide management services for the association and serve as the central processing site for packing and distribution of the product to markets. Two workshops were held in 2009 to continue the launching process.

The AUMC followed well-known principles for crop introductions, including field testing, observations for exotic pests, and potential consumer use and acceptance. There have been challenges along the way. Finance has been the most challenging. The nonpaid Boards of Directors of the Auksuciai Foundation and the Farm and Forestry Center have donated countless hours and significant amounts of money to the efforts. Several hundred individual donors have been the lifeblood of the operations. But now much larger amounts of funds are needed for purchase of specialized transplanting and cultivation equipment, processing and packing lines, and vehicles for transport of equipment to farms and product to markets. Our efforts to procure these funds include proposals to the EU, Lithuanian government and private foundations.

We remain optimistic about the prospects of launching a significant enterprise to supplement small farms income and to expand the cuisine of Lithuanian diets. We fully expect consumer acceptance to be very enthusiastic, but an educational

³ Qualset, C.O. 2004. The Auksuciai model for agricultural development in Lithuania. P. 6-12. In: C.O. Qualset, A. Radzevcius, and M. Liegus (Eds.) *Auksuciai Agricultural Development Conference Proceedings*. University of California-Davis, Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture, and Lithuanian University of Agriculture.

program must be done. A EU inter-regional proposal for Lithuania-Latvia cooperation on educational activities is being reviewed now.

We believe there are lessons to be learned from our experiences, just as we would like to learn from experiences of others with similar goals. The ELKANA project in Georgia is a very significant model in this regard. Also the expanding influence of Slow Foods is providing guidance and encouragement. Mr. Ritins has an active Slow Foods effort in Latvia, but a similar effort in Lithuania lags behind up to now.

We welcome comments and suggestions, and, of course, financial support for this effort. Please visit our web site for further information [www.aukfound.org].