



Corn smut is considered a delicacy in parts of Mexico and the U.S., and Texas researchers are trying to develop methods for small-scale farmers to grow it.

Corn Smut Grown As High-Value Crop

Veronica Guzman's research focuses on growing corn smut - on purpose. That goes against the sensibilities of conventional crop producers, but Guzman isn't working for big farmers.

"We're trying to develop methods for small-scale farmers for direct marketing. We're looking for high-value alternative crops in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas," she explains.

The Aztecs were the first people known to eat corn smut, which is called huitlacoche (pronounced WEET-LA-KO-CHEE), and it is considered a delicacy in Mexico City and other regions of Mexico. The fungus has a mild, earthy flavor and is used in a variety of recipes. Nutritionally, it's packed with unique proteins and minerals, and loaded with lysine, an essential amino acid. It has more cholesterol fighting beta-glucens than oatmeal.

The only method that worked (60 percent success rate) was using a pure culture strain of the fungus, which she grows in a broth media. Guzman's challenge is to develop a method that makes it easy for a farmer to access and apply the spores to inoculate their sweet corn or field corn. Biological supply companies could provide spores, and Guzman believes that farmers could use backpack sprayers or automatic syringes to inoculate corn.

The other challenge is harvest.

"There's just a one or two-day window to harvest it," she explains. About 16 to 24 days after inoculation, the Huitlacoche is moist, spongy and ready for harvest. It doesn't take long for it to become mushy and inedible.

The fresh Huitlacoche must be put on ice and shipped overnight, sold right away, or frozen.

With recent publicity, she's had calls from chefs, so she knows there is a market. More information about her research can be found at www.southernsare.org.

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Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Weaver's Compact Tractor, 22 Fish Hatchery Rd., Shippensburg, Penn. 17257 (ph 866 950-1050; fax 717 530-9705; Mon.-Fri. 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. EST). Dealers welcome.

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