CHALLENGES IN INTRODUCING A NEW CROP ENTERPRISE IN LITHUANIA: A CASE STUDY FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

John Chiles, Calvin O. Qualset, Vaida Sileikaite
Auksculiai Farm and Forestry Center, Lithuania-USA

Annotation
A small, U.S.A.-based foundation, The Auksuciai Foundation, has established a Lithuanian-chartered research and development center, the Farm and Forestry Center near Kursenai, at a farm returned to the Sliupas Family after Lithuanian independence in 1991. The main goal for the Center is to discover and facilitate the introduction of new sustainable farm enterprises for small-holding farmers in Lithuania. Among many crop plants under study, asparagus was selected as a promising new farming activity because this globally important crop has not been produced and little consumed in Lithuania. Field studies at the Center have shown promising yields and good quality product. This paper will report the agronomic information and educational efforts aimed at establishing this crop as an economically viable enterprise for Lithuanian farmers. Lessons learned will be useful for similar developments in other countries.

Keywords: farm and forestry center, small-holding farmers, asparagus, Village Innovations Association, Slow Foods movement.

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 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 built a house that served as the operations headquarters and living quarters for staff. Later, a significant donation was received from Mrs. 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 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 encoura-

gement 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 day\textsuperscript{2}. 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 attended 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 Vincent’s Restaurant in Latvia. 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 of the association and serve as the central processing site for packing and distribution of the product to markets.

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 non-paid Boards of Directors of the Auksciai Foundation and the Farm and Forestry Center have donated countless hours and significant amounts of money to the efforts. Several hundred donors have been the lifeblood of the operations. The Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture has provided small grants to support field days and workshops. 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.

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 a promotional educational program must be conducted.

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. Locally based organizations are necessary to sustain the development efforts. Examples include the of Slow Foods movement in several countries, including Latvia, and the ELKANA farmer-based organization in Georgia. The promotional activities through television and guest appearances of Chef Martins Ritins of Riga, Latvia have large positive impacts on public awareness of new and traditional foods.