
Walnuts and Pecans - Nebraska Style

Based on 35 years of research by the Nebraska Nut Growers Association and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, numerous landowners have planted walnut and pecan trees for commercial nut production in southeast Nebraska and adjacent states. These trees have matured and began to produce crops of nuts, marketing is now the issue.

In 2005, members of Nebraska Nut Growers Association (NeNGA), recognizing the marketing problem, formed Heartland Nuts ‘N More (HN’NM) a cooperatively-owned business to assist nut growers in selling their production of nuts & nut products. Initially, 32 members made financial commitments to form the cooperative. HN’NM now boasts 46 members from four states: Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri.

Their financial commitment provided opportunities to secure grants from a variety of sources. “If we hadn’t received those grants, we probably wouldn’t have started up at all.” said HN’NM spokesman Larry Martin. Grant funds were used to purchase a variety of equipment. A mechanized “tree shaker” loosens nuts from trees, allowing the nuts to be collected on tarps or plastic. HN’NM also has a mechanized “nut harvester” to collect nuts off the ground.

Collected nuts are brought to the coop’s headquarters building in Valparaiso, NE, which also serves as the nut processing plant where a series of machines crack, sort, and package the nut meats. The nuts are stored in a cooler until sold. The highest quality black walnuts and pecans are sold in several local stores in Omaha and Lincoln including, Boiler Room, Whole Foods, Open Harvest, Ideal Foods, and Grow Nebraska. Bakers Candies in Greenwood, NE, have used HN’NM nuts in their black walnut clusters for a several years. Martin said, “the clusters are just flying out the door!” HN’NM is also currently negotiating with Prairie Land Dairy to use the cooperative’s black walnuts in some of their ice cream.

Martin said they advertise in several magazines, including Nebraska Life Magazine. They are also members of other cooperatively-owned businesses, including Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska® and Grow Nebraska. HN’NM is planning to expand their product line to use some of the waste/by-products created when the walnuts and pecans are cracked. Products from the husk, shell, and black walnut juice are already available. Black walnut husk is a dietary supplement pill used as an intestinal cleanser. Black walnut juices can be used as a wood or tanning stain. The hard shell can be ground into size grades used for “sand blasting” purposes. Ground walnut shell pieces stay intact and sharp and can be reused four to five times, rather than just once like sand. Walnut shell can be pelletized to fuel wood pellet stoves. The HN’NM building is heated with pellets made from the shell of walnut and pecan.

HN’NM still has hurdles to overcome to become profitable, but the organization is optimistic about the future. HN’NM products can be purchased through their website or through the Nebraska Nut Growers Association’s website, www.nebraskanutgrowers.org. Heartland Nuts ‘N More can be contacted at: 206 West 2nd Street, Valparaiso, NE 68065; phone: (402)784-6887; website: <http://heartlandnutsnmore.com>

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