

Celery Industry

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A normal celery field was five acres in a rectangular shape, about 330ft. across. Irrigation of such a field was accomplished by artesian sulphur water wells, sometimes 200 ft. deep. The water ran through pockets, which were terracotta or concrete cylinders of various diameters from 12" to 24" or larger, sunk vertically in the soil every 22' to 25' across the field. There were about 31 pockets for a five acre plot. From these ran lateral lines of 4" tile loosely butted together and laid in straw or sawdust. To control the water flow, a vertical divider with holes at three levels was placed in the center of the feeder pocket. the height of the water in this pocket was regulated by cement plugs placed in the desired hole level of the divider; wooden plugs placed in the head tiles at the bottom of the pocket controlled water flow to the lateral lines.

In Seminole County a unique hard pan about two feet below ground level kept the irrigated water within reach of the plant root system. Also, fitting into this culture system was the fact that celery was fairly tolerant of the sulphur water. The arrangement described above was known as the Sanford sub-irrigation system, perfected in about 1897.

EARLY SEMINOLE COUNTY CELERY CULTURE;
An Extremely High Labor Intensive Industry

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Farmers raised their own celery plants. The growing cycle started in mid-July. Seed beds about 42" wide were built up between 24" wide depressed alleys shoveled out between the beds, which were thus elevated about 4" above the alleys. To irrigate the beds after the seeds germinated, water was run down the alleys, as the young plants were not able at this stage to benefit from sub-irrigation. Seed to be sown was placed in approximately 5" x 10" perforated cylinders rolled over the seed beds by cylinders attached to a 48" handle pull stick. About once a week a one-wheeled liquid fertilizer sprayer was pushed and pumped while another man directed a hose and spray nozzle delivering fungicide.

To protect the sprouting seed and grown plants from rain and the hot sun, a cloth canopy was draped over frame supports. Actually, the frames and cloth were erected before seed planting. The 72" wide cloth was created by farm women sewing two 36" widths of muslin type sheeting, which was then soaked in a mixture of sugar lead (lead acetate) and alum to prevent mildewing. After soaking, the cloth was run through a conventional clothes wringer. As the seedlings grew older, more sun was admitted by tying back the cloth for parts of the day. Watering was also accomplished by hand poured sprinkling cans, the water for which was drawn out of pockets by bilge type hand operated pocket pumps.

When the seedlings were ready to set out between September and October, an angular sheet metal tool about 24" long with 1" x 1" sides was inserted across the seed bed to scoop out the seedlings for planting. But first the celery beds were marked out on the soil by hand dragging a marking grid over the growing area, and then another marker called a checker was hand dragged over the beds to check out lines four inches apart, where the plants were to be troweled in after the workers had removed them by angular scoops from the seed beds.

After a heavy rain, a subsoiler was pulled by a mule to loosen up the soil between the rows. The subsoiler produced a mole-like effect by running mostly under the soil surface.

About two weeks before harvesting, 12" cypress boards were originally placed on both sides of each celery bed to cause the desired bleaching of the plants. Otherwise, the plants would remain green in color. Later, this boarding operation was accomplished by 300 ft. rolls of reinforced tar paper supported by wire wickets and stretched out along the beds. After the paper had accomplished its purpose, it was rerolled by a crank operated roller attached to a wooden table retriever.

Depending on when planting occurred between September and October, the mature celery plants were harvested between January and April. Cutting was accomplished by a two-wheeled device with a cutter knife held between the wheels and pulled backwards, cutting the celery plants above ground level. The cut celery was then placed in crates and hauled to a nearby washer, where it was also graded and cooled down before shipment to ice-cooled refrigerator freight cars.

In 1925 celery workers were paid twenty five cents a day, which pay gradually increased to \$42.50 per week by 1960.

Brand names in Seminole County were as follows: 7-11 for the Sanford-Oviedo Truck Growers Association; for Chase and Company it was Sunniland, a name which continues today for agricultural products by a successor company employing Sunniland as its operating name; and the retired World War II general, who accepted the Japanese army surrender, J. C. Hutchinson, appropriately called his number one grade Top Kick, and his second grade was named Gold Gem. For Andrew Duda & Sons of Slavia the brands were Supreme (fancy quality), Superior (special pack), and Par for the third grade.

Henry Schumacher, Sr., a Sanford area celery farmer, first experimented with a mechanized celery harvester. In 19 A. Duda & Sons of Oviedo patented a large five axle self propelled, mobile celery packing house and washer called a muletrain, which combines field harvesting and packing in one operation, but still requires a considerable field crew to cut 28 rows as the machine slowly crawls along at 4 ft. per minute, while towing a loading truck behind. However, the simultaneous advent of the farm tractor and the draining of large muckland acreage in south Florida sealed the doom of the small field celery industry. In Oviedo there now remain three large commercial celery growers, along with four others in south Florida for a total of seven in the state.

Arthur E. Francke, Jr.
March 30, 1983

A HISTORY OF CELERY

Celery's history is the most interesting of any member of the vegetable family, having its beginning before the Birth of Christ when then it was used for medicinal purposes. In fact its health giving content has made the plant invaluable through the ages.

Originally celery was called "*celeri*" which means "quick acting." The old celery types were very strong smelling and were also called "*smellage*" and "*smallage*," words used by English scholars of old.

Apium Graveolens is its scientific name. *Apium* is a Latin word meaning "*liked by bees*," given by the ancient Latin peoples to the plant long before the Birth of Christ, as the flowers of celery are attractive to wild bees. *Graveolens* is a Latin word meaning "*strong smelling*" referring to the ill smelling weed-like plants which the old herb doctors used for medicine.

A botanist by the name of Ray, writing in 1639, speaks of the English *Smallage* being brought into the garden and cultivated, where it became milder. It was known, however, long before that time, because the wild plant was spoken of by Homer in his *Odyssey*, by many writers of ancient times, and was used by herb doctors of ancient Egypt. The Chinese Writer Nung Cheng Ts'nan Shu described it as a cultivated plant in that country in 1640. There are many instances of its use as a table vegetable as early as the sixteenth century. In Italy and France it was used as a table delicacy, the leaves and stalks "eaten with oil and pepper."

The early celery varieties were tough and stringy. It is only in recent years that the dark green varieties have been replaced by the tender light green or "Golden" types, for which Seminole County is so famous.

Celery was brought to America in the early days of its settlement. There is a legend that the plants were brought over by the French Huguenots when they landed near Charleston, South Carolina in 1637.

The plant was not found in Florida until 1869 when it was introduced in the Sanford-Oviedo section of Seminole County.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ADDRESS
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CELERY



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