

Fantastic food-grade flax!

Quality means everything in the food-grade flax market. Bakery products, nutraceuticals and health foods are becoming major markets. Consumers pay a premium to get flax food product. Growers can earn top price with teamwork and planning.

Here's the secret: Food grade flax has to be clean. It has to look good. It has to smell good. It has to be on the shelf, ready to buy, when the consumer comes back in a week or a month to buy it again. It is a very different product from industrial flax. Consumption has risen to an estimated 10 percent of the flax market in western Canada.

As a high-end food, quality flax needs a priority treatment. Any time, from field to bin to truck, the grower should be comfortable enough with the quality to eat the fresh flax seed.

Production team

Flax is high in a highly unsaturated fat that will oxidize readily. Once oxidation starts, the process is considered irreversible. Initial quality has to be very good. Unlike milling wheat or oats, flax processors can't cook it or toast it to make it 'safe.' Therefore, growers must be more cautious.

Samples are crucial. Food-grade flax processors see the sample as a ready-to-eat, clean and appealing food. It must exceed Canadian Grain Commission standards. To protect their own market niche, processors won't spell out every characteristic they want. They evaluate each sample, and only accept whatever meets their own specifications.

Flax growers who consistently grow food-grade flax become part of a team. Processors know food-grade flax suppliers as team members on a first-name basis and try to treat them well. When it's time to sell new crop flax, they rally the production team. The idea is that the processor's customers, wherever they are in the world, will return for more Canadian flax because it's always good quality, always fresh and always tastes good. They're buying a product from a production team, and that's where growers participate.

Growers who make the team can benefit four ways:

- Preferred customer status
- Premium price
- Pickup at the farmyard
- Early delivery

Food-grade flax premiums change with supply and market conditions. Premiums soared to record highs after the early frost in 2004. Premiums narrowed in 2005 when storage systems were packed with high quality flax. Still, top grade flax gained a premium.

Production practices

Careful crop management can improve growers' chances of obtaining a premium for food-grade quality flax. Here are some practical suggestions:

Plant early. Flax that was planted early, generally, will mature early. Late flax may be 'boxed' by cool weather. If the natural ripening process is delayed, growers may need a killing frost – or desiccant – to stop the growth and get flax straw dry enough to harvest successfully. Desiccated flax generally cannot qualify for food-grade. Late-harvested flax often has quality issues that make it unacceptable for food-grade. As a rule, planting early leads to best-possible yields and quality.

Select a clean field. Weed control options in flax are limited, in general, and especially in the food-grade market. Flax is harder to clean than grains or other oilseeds and, for food-grade, it must be cleaned to a much higher standard – more than 99% pure flax seed. Lady's-thumb and black medic can't be separated and their presence eliminates any hope of reaching food-grade. Other weed seeds, like smartweed and small buckwheat, are hard to remove and may be a problem.

Select a uniform field. Uniformity is more important than field size. The crop has to emerge, develop and ripen evenly to achieve a uniform quality. If the crop in a field isn't uniform, the crop should be harvested and stored separately. Buyers are paid to spot seeds that are immature, frozen, damaged or discoloured in any way. In some areas, uniformity can be improved by rolling the field in spring and straight-cutting at harvest.

Prepare for two flax grades. Segregate areas that won't give a food-

grade sample, such as spots that are low, drowned-out or suffering from weed infestation. Keep good quality seed together; put the rest somewhere else.

Pre-harvest prep. Cleaning for food-grade flax is not casual. Get everything clean and ready before the flax harvest. Wash the truck box if it ever held fertilizer. Clean the auger, and be sure that auger has never been used for treated grain. Clean the bins. Be ready to aerate or dry down any flax that has high moisture.

Harvest procedure. Pay attention to detail. Let it dry down naturally, if possible, and get the flax off as soon as it's ripe and ready. Don't let it deteriorate while you take off other crops. Get it as clean as possible with the least possible damage. It should be free of dust, dirt and green seeds.

Desiccant warning. It may be necessary to desiccate a flax crop, but that crop no longer will be accepted by processors for food-grade flax. Flax in food has its strongest appeal to health-conscious consumers. It must be seen as chemical-free, and sophisticated multiple-residue analysis can detect minute traces of chemical months after an application.

Harvest rain. Watch out for rain once the flax stops growing. Flax bolls will soak up moisture and produce dark kernels. Consumers are visual; they won't buy a product with black or shriveled kernels, and neither will food-grade flax processors.

Food-grade Quality Flax

Sampling procedure. Collect samples anywhere but the bin door. Sample as the flax comes in, taking a few scoops as each truck or hopper is unloading. Take the same number of scoops each time, and take them from different parts of the load. Put them all in a pail, and keep that sample in a cool, dry place. Send in a representa-

tive sample from that pail as soon as possible.

Flax storage. Finally, store the flax for food-grade premiums in clean, tight steel bins. Food processors have no tolerance for contamination by birds or rodents.