

THIS SAE POPPED OFF

A kernel of an idea led this National Trail FFA member to a creative (and delicious!) supervised agricultural experience.

— By Jodi Helmer

Grant Deaton remembers when his dad rented farmland from a man who sold popcorn at local fairs and festivals around their hometown of New Paris, Ohio. Deaton's dad didn't know enough about the crop to start growing it, but the idea stayed with the National Trail High School junior who decided to experiment with the crop for his supervised agricultural experience (SAE).

"When I was deciding on my SAE, all I knew was I wanted something different," Deaton says. "I didn't want to do the same things other FFA members were, and popcorn was unique."

In 2022, Deaton planted a quarter acre of popcorn. Today, the National Trail FFA member grows three and a half acres of the unique crop and demand has, well, popped off. Deaton sold 300 pounds of individually packaged popcorn in 2023, followed by 1,000 pounds in the first quarter of

2024. Looking ahead, he plans to increase his production levels to meet the demand.

"It's pretty exciting to see the growth," he says.

Doing to Learn

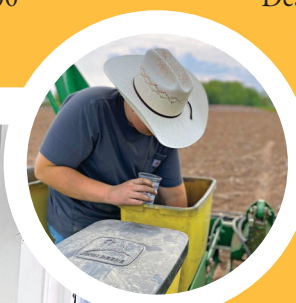
However, it took some trial and error to get to this point. Deaton wasn't pleased with the quality of his initial crop, which was better suited for small gardens, not commercial production. Before he switched suppliers, Deaton ordered samples of 15 popcorn varieties, popped all the corn and set up a taste test. He used these results to choose new varieties of white, yellow and mushroom popcorn.

Although growing popcorn is like growing field corn, Deaton learned the moisture content must be just right for the maximum number of kernels to pop. To ensure his popping corn doesn't have too much (or too little) moisture,

Deaton picks several ears of corn, puts the kernels in a moisture tester and pops some test batches before he harvests.

Once Deaton is certain the crop is ready, he harvests it using a machine purchased on Facebook Marketplace, then packages it in one-pound packages under the Deaton Popcorn label. He sells popcorn online and has contracts with high school concessions, baseball leagues, kettle corn vendors and retailers; Deaton Popcorn is even sold at the local movie theater.

"The biggest reward from my SAE is seeing its improvement," he says. "Sales have gone up tremendously, and people are interested in the product. I'm excited to see what will happen next."



Grant Deaton designed custom packaging, including a Deaton Popcorn logo, to help market his products to consumers.



Kick-Start Your SAE

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