

## New Sweetener Grows in Chowchilla Test Plots

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**MADERA** - A company with test plots in Chowchilla is intent on entering the world-wide market by producing and marketing a sweetener extracted from a plant called stevia. Touted as an herb in Paraguay, its country of origin, the plant contains a chemical in its leaves that can be used as a natural sugar substitute.

Marketing claims point to the chemical known as "Reb-A" found in the leaf that is purported to be 300 times sweeter than sugar but without calories. Use of it is increasing, according to S&W Seed Company in its July newsletter, by food and beverage manufacturers using it to sweeten new products.

Representatives of S&W Seed Company, a business best known for growing and developing alfalfa seed, agree there are many unanswered questions regarding the shallow rooted, water thirsty, frost sensitive, warm weather stevia plant.

"There is so much to learn," said Koren Sihota, stevia program director with S&W Seed Company. "I can't really compare it with other plants." Sihota is a Fresno State University business major who grew up in agriculture.

"Its roots are very fibrous and shallow. They go down no more than six inches below the surface," said Sihota. Consequently, deep, infrequent watering is probably not the best practice. "A constant supply of water, perhaps four hours a day is best."

At least three varieties, each with a different after taste, have been planted in Madera County.

Sihota told a story about stevia plants sent from India and slated for Chowchilla, but were held up at customs because the plant could not, at first, be identified by inspectors. Although the perennial plants (growing more than one season) were forced into dormancy for travel purposes they suffered a setback because of the delay. Due to the delay, it was well into summer when the plants were put into the soil and the tops promptly burned. Nevertheless, the plants are slowly making a comeback from the roots. Other stevia plants to be planted have been started in a Fresno nursery, and are reportedly doing well.

Sihota said different varieties of plants and plant cross-breeding are taking place. Stevia varieties can be found in China, Thailand, Paraguay, Kenya and Indonesia.

"With plant breeding, you are never done," Sihota said. "The key is finding the right variety for your area."

Grover Wickersham, a board member of S&W Seed Company with family ties to the Triangle Ranch where stevia has been test planted, said there has been little interest in stevia in this country until about two years ago. "It's been used for a long time in different countries around the world, particularly Japan, but the chemical industry stopped it from being used until there was a change in our administration," Wickersham said.

S&W, based in Fresno County is working with PureCircle, a stevia leaf processing company to test different varieties of stevia to see how well they taste and grow in California.

"We have a scientist on retainer - someone with a long history with UC Davis who has done work (research) on the plant in the past. We also have people compiling information from trials done in different areas - other people's trials. I have been all over the world - even Michigan, where studies are going on in a greenhouse," Wickersham said.

The company has plans to expand by contracting with farmers in the Central Valley to grow and ship the product to China for processing.

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