Before You Get Excited About Spice Production, Consider This

ECHO Inc.

(Condensed from Spore magazine, December 1992). Perhaps growing up on a small farm in Ohio made me a cynic, but it seems that any farm product that is at all profitable will be overproduced within a few years. It is happening to spices.

Three years ago black pepper sold for US $ 2,428 per ton. By mid 1992 it had fallen to $1,000. The price of cloves dropped from $5 per pound a decade ago to 80¢ (because Indonesia, which imported vast quantities to flavor cigarettes, now produces its own.) In Madagascar, clove trees are being cut for firewood. Vanilla pods dropped from $74 per kg to $50. Madagascar had vanilla stocks at the end of 1990 equal to 2-3 years' total world consumption!

Are there any [temporary] bright spots? Markets for chili and paprika peppers remain strong and there is some room for growth. The market for cassia and cinnamon is steady because of their use in cola drinks. Allspice is in short supply and prices have risen. The use of spices which are used as a natural coloring (e. g. paprika and turmeric) may increase. Some spices, e. g. black pepper and vanilla, can be successfully intercropped. Black pepper grows well using coconut tree trunks as part of its support.

"It is quite clear that 'Will it grow?' is not the first question to be asked. 'Will it sell?' is a better starting point."

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