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**Virginia
Dark-fired
Tobacco**



**Quality
is the
Key**

Extension Division

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Blacksburg, Virginia 24061

Virginia Dark-fired Tobacco

QUALITY IS THE KEY

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Virginia dark-fired tobacco is a specialty product used in the blends of a number of different tobacco products, both in the U.S. and in many other countries of the world. Each year 60 to 70 percent of the Virginia dark-fired crop is exported.

The future of this important crop depends to a large extent on continued efforts by growers to produce high-quality tobacco with distinctive taste, flavor, and aroma. New and inexperienced growers are cautioned to avoid using non-traditional cultural and curing practices, and to make every effort to produce a high-quality crop in 1981 and future years.

This leaflet outlines production practices that will help supply the quality tobacco that will be acceptable to the trade.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Limit crop size to the acreage that can be closely supervised so that all cultural, harvesting, curing, and marketing practices can be carried out on time.

Select fields with a soil which has good internal and external drainage. The best tobacco is generally produced on soils such as Cecil, Lloyd, Madison, and Appling.

Choose a variety that has the potential of producing high yields of traditional quality cured leaf, and that has the level and type of resistance necessary to provide adequate disease protection when combined with other control practices.

Use suggested chemical soil treatments for insect and disease control where needed.

Follow at least a three-year rotation to produce high-quality tobacco and reduce the risk of black root rot and black shank. Such a rotation might include tobacco, small grain, and red clover.

PRODUCTION

Produce an adequate supply of healthy plants so that the crop can be transplanted at the optimum time.

Soil testing is the best method for determining the amounts of phosphate, potash, and lime needed.

Use sufficient rates of fertilizer to produce good yields of high-quality tobacco. Present research indicates that 125 to 150 pounds of nitrogen per acre is necessary to produce a good crop of dark-fired tobacco.

Apply all fertilizer so that fertilizer injury will be kept at a minimum. Fertilizer injury can cause poor stands and irregular growth.

Space plants 28-30 inches apart in rows 42 inches apart. This will provide approximately 5,000 to 5,350 plants per acre.

Transplant the crop between May 15 and 25. Later transplanting may delay maturation of the crop and make curing more difficult in late fall. Early transplanting may result in premature flowering.

Top the plants at 12 to 14 leaves, depending upon the vigor of the plant after the bud has formed, but before the flowers begin to open. Extremely high topping has proven detrimental to the quality of dark-fired tobacco.

Strive for complete sucker control by using one or two applications of a contact-type

sucker control chemical followed by an application of maleic hydrazide.

PEST CONTROL

Control weeds and grasses by cultivation and herbicides when needed. Poor weed control can reduce both yield and cured leaf quality.

Control tobacco diseases and insects using selected management practices and suggested pesticides. See the Virginia Pest Management Guide 1 for pesticide recommendations. Avoid excessive use of pesticides and always read the label.

HARVESTING AND CURING

Harvest the crop when the leaves are mature, but not over-ripe. At this stage, the tissues of the leaves are brittle and break under pressure. If a portion of the leaf is folded and mashed between the thumb and forefinger, it will break. Delaying harvest past the optimum stage of maturity will result in poor cured leaf quality.

Take care not to bruise or break the leaves before they have wilted, and do not expose them to the hot sun for any length of time. Bruised, broken, or sun-scalded leaves will not make quality tobacco.

With tobacco of average size, do not put more than 5 to 6 plants per stick. The important point is — don't let your tobacco be overcrowded in the barn because you put too many plants on the sticks.

Scaffolding in the field is a good practice. Proper scaffolding will result in less bruising and breaking of the tobacco, and the wilted tobacco will be easier to handle in the barn.

Avoid overcrowding in the curing barn. Space sticks at least 8 inches apart on the tier poles. If the weather is cool and the barn is open, the sticks of tobacco are sometimes

pushed up close together as they are put in the barn and allowed to yellow; then they should be spaced the proper distance for "firing". In filling the barn, each room should be filled from top to bottom. Green tobacco should not be placed under partially cured tobacco.

Avoid hot fires during the yellowing period. Such fires will kill the plants and result in a fixed green color. During the yellowing period, it is important to have many smoldering fires rather than a few large ones.

MARKET PREPARATION

After the tobacco is thoroughly cured, take it down and bulk as much as possible. Bulking will improve the texture and color of the leaf, and prevent loss of weight which occurs when tobacco is left hanging in the barn after curing is complete.

Sort the tobacco according to body, quality, color, and length. The number of grades you need to make depends on the kind of crop produced. With most crops, it is desirable to make at least 3 grades.

- Keep colors separate and never mix green and off-colored leaves with other grades.
- Keep leaves of different lengths separate. Best quality tobacco 22" long or longer is generally more valuable than tobacco less than 22" long.

Tie the tobacco into neat, uniform hands with heads 1 inch in diameter.

Avoid offering for sale any nested piles of tobacco. Be sure that each lot of tobacco is uniform from top to bottom and from side to side.

Cover the tobacco to protect it from rain and dust, and to prevent it from drying on the truck and before the sale.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

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