

# Chilis for Hot Lips Non-Food Bonanza

SEP 20 1980

"What is that growing out there?" Larry Willcox of Oklahoma City asked his friend as they drove through the Pecos River valley near Roswell, N.M. "Is it what I think it is?"

As a former farm loan executive Willcox had toured the area many times, but this crop had an unfamiliar look.

"If you think it is chilis, you are right," replied Frank Young, Roswell banker. By chilis, of course, he meant what we Oklahomans call chili peppers. It has become a major crop in the area, and 75 percent of it is bought by Revlon cosmetics manufacturers to color lipstick. "Chilis for Hot Lips" is the slogan used locally.

While agriculture produces our food, a great deal that comes from farms goes to serve non-food purposes in our complex lives.

Carrots produced in the Rio Grande Valley are used to color rouge. When the use of synthetic red dyes was banned, processors began using beet juice as food coloring.

## Ferdie J. Deering

Non-food agriculture was a big factor in developing the United States, as demand in Europe for furs and hides led trappers into the wildernesses. Tobacco became the first American money crop, and cotton was not far behind, becoming an even bigger crop.

Currently, the big thing in non-food agriculture is conversion of wheat and other plants into alcohol to make gasohol. The basic idea was advocated by Alexander Graham Bell and Henry Ford more than 50 years ago. In the 1930s International Harvester Co. made and sold alcohol-powered trucks in the Philippines.

Technology for gasohol has been around a long time, but economic feasibility has been lacking. When it became politically feasible, the government began pouring millions of dollars into synthetic fuels research, plant construction and product subsidies.

This set off a stampede of searches for low-cost raw materials from which to make alcohol. Wheat, corn and grain-sorghum growers are leading promoters, hopeful that fuel demand will absorb much of what they can grow at rates equivalent to food prices or better.

Sugar cane, poplar trees, corn stover, wheat straw, jimson weeds, tumbleweeds and milkweeds are among plants being studied.

"And then there's gopherweed," The Wall Street Journal reported recently. 'Gopherweed is a 5-foot-high cousin of the rubber tree. It grows wild in the semi-arid plains of Arizona, Texas and New Mexico, and its milky sap contains hydrocarbons, the organic compound that's in regular below-the-ground oil."

Before suspending operations recently, a plant in the Oklahoma Panhandle was converting cattle manure into methane gas. Chicken manure is used elsewhere. Research has been started at Anadarko to convert

peanut oil into "piesel," a combination of crude peanut oil and diesel fuel.

Another major non-food crop in Oklahoma is the forest industry. Besides supplying us with lumber and paper, trees are used in compounding medicines and pharmaceuticals, paints, cosmetics, textiles and numerous other consumer or industrial products.

Sunflowers are being grown as a crop to produce oil for food and industrial purposes. Hulls can be compacted into briquets to burn in fireplaces. Oklahoma has grown thousands of acres of guar, a busy legume, that is used in making cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, paper, cloth and oil-well drilling mud, as

well as being used for food.

Chemists from East Texas State University reported a few months ago that there is strong scientific backing for the folk medicine belief that people who consume onion juice don't usually get high blood pressure or hypertension.

The decorative value of flowers, trees and

other plants, including our state flower, mistletoe, represent non-food agriculture. There could be a great deal more of it in our future. Of an estimated 800,000 species of plants on earth, only some 250 kinds are cultivated to any commercial extent. Wheat, rice, maize (corn) and potatoes account for a major portion of this production.