

BUSINESS

Owatonna's Bushel Boy adds cucumbers to its basket of produce grown year-round

The company, known best for its tomatoes, recently harvested its first cukes.

By Brooks Johnson (<https://www.startribune.com/brooks-johnson/6134711/>) Star Tribune |

SEPTEMBER 20, 2022 — 5:00AM | [▶ Listen with Speechify](#)

OWATONNA — The first cucumbers grown in one of Bushel Boy's sprawling greenhouses were plucked from their vines last week.

The first of many.

"That one acre, over a 12-month time period, [produces] about a million pounds," Bushel Boy president Chuck Tryon said. "That's a large enough scale to have quantities available for our core customers in the Twin Cities year-round."

Bushel Boy, best known for its indoor-grown tomatoes, has become the state's first year-round cucumber grower — capitalizing on the humble vegetable's growing popularity.

"Cucumbers have been seeing strong growth, more than most other food and vegetable categories," Tryon said. "Anything with a snacking element, from a consumer standpoint — those categories are doing really well."

Among the top 10 best-selling vegetables in the U.S., only cucumbers saw volumes increase last month over the previous year, according to IRI data. That adds to a 50-year trend that has seen cucumber consumption continue to rise. Fueling that growth is the "increasing popularity of salads and mini or snacking varieties," according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Bushel Boy expects to have six-packs of mini cucumbers and individual long cucumbers available in stores next month, just as the supply grown outdoors by other operators fades.

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Gallery: A Bushel Boy employee works the first cucumber harvest at a greenhouse in Owatonna, Minn., on Friday.

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For years, the majority of indoor-grown cucumbers sold in the U.S. — which is the world's largest cucumber importer — have come from Mexico and Canada.

A U.S. International Trade Commission report found domestic cucumber production dropped significantly between 2015 and 2020 while demand rose 24%. And imports kept rising during the pandemic to match the surge in home cooking.

Though it's tough to compete on price with cucumbers grown in Mexico, leaders at Bushel Boy hope that the locally grown tag on their supermarket cucumbers available in December could boost their sales.

Cucumbers are 95% water, and the more time they spend in transit, the more water — and flavor — they lose.

Cucumbers grow fast and need conditions similar to indoor tomatoes. The only difference: bees. Tomatoes benefit from bees, but Bushel Boy's cucumbers are meant to be seedless, and so should remain unpollinated.

"We're really validating everything we knew about cucumbers," said head grower Roberto Ramirez, who touted the highly sophisticated monitoring system and environment controls that bring uniformity to the finished products.

"One of the coolest things I like about this job is if you see something, you do something and see results," he said.

Minnesota greenhouses produced about 200,000 pounds of cucumbers in 2019, according to the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture data. Nationwide, 51 million pounds of greenhouse cucumbers were grown that year.

Most outdoor-grown slicing cucumbers — those meant to be eaten fresh and not pickled — are grown in the southeastern U.S. A few hundred small produce farms in Minnesota grow them outdoors during the summer months, according to the state Department of Agriculture.

By using just a quarter of one of its nine greenhouses, Bushel Boy will account for 85% of the state's indoor cucumber production.

"Local has never been more important," said Derek Eddie, director of sales and marketing. "We're going to continue to innovate and grow new things."

Beyond tomatoes and cucumbers, Bushel Boy is now in its second season growing strawberries. (<https://www.startribune.com/known-for-tomatoes-owatonnas-bushel-boy-adds-indoor-strawberries/600114242/>) The 32-year-old company is testing other produce as commercial greenhouses and vertical farming operations (<https://www.startribune.com/minnesotas-living-greens-farm-has-ambitious-indoor-produce-plans/600116250/>) are increasingly proposed as one step in slowing climate change.

Though indoor farming is an energy-intensive business, it often uses water and nutrients much more efficiently. Growing crops closer to consumers helps offset some of the energy used by shortening the distance for transporting the produce.

"As vertical farming methods and technology continue to improve, it's likely that their total carbon footprint will improve in tandem, making indoor farming a reliable way to grow healthy food with minimal environmental impact," according to a report from the



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Bushel Boy celebrates its first cucumber harvest at its greenhouse in Owatonna, Minn., on Friday.



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Food Institute.

Bushel Boy, owned since 2018 by Shakopee-based Rahr Corp., recently added a greenhouse campus in Mason City, Iowa (<https://www.startribune.com/bushel-boy-farms-building-35-million-facility-to-increase-tomato-business/560260802/>). It was able to move some tomato growing there to make room for cukes.

"We don't want to miss a chance to lean in — we believe we can grow these really well," Tryon said "All indications are that belief is real."

Bushel Boy employees work the first cucumber harvest at its Owatonna greenhouse on Friday. It takes just four weeks for a plant to produce fruit.

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