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Fall Desert Crop Workshop focuses on pest control, possible 'superfood' crop new to the Valley

By MARCIE LANDEROS Special to this Newspaper
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Oli G. Bachie, the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Cooperative Extension Agronomy and We Management Advisor for Imperial, speaks on a new crop to the Imperial Valley, moringa oleifera, during the 33rd annual Fall Desert Crops Workshop, Wednesday, November 30, in Imperial.

MARCIE LANDEROS PHOTO

IMPERIAL — As local farmers and agricultural scientists gathered to discuss issues relating to agriculture during the 33rd annual Fall Desert Crops Workshop, one subject came up over and over: pest control management.

Imperial County Agricultural Commissioner Carlos Ortiz kicked off the discussion on Wednesday, Nov. 30 by doing an overview of pest control issues in Imperial County. Ortiz specifically shared stories with farmers about how to handle situations with residents who are concerned about crop-dusting and the use of insecticides.

One of the biggest suggestions Ortiz had for farmers was to notify individuals who live in neighboring residences when crop-dusting is going to occur so those individuals have the option to leave.

"They really don't understand that growers aren't just applying pesticides because they want too, but because they need too," Ortiz said.

Additionally, Ortiz handed out the Imperial County Agricultural Crop and Livestock Report, which lists the 2021 gross value of Imperial County as \$2,287,312,000, which \$260,885,000 over 2020's gross value of \$2,026,427,000.

Cattle was the top agricultural commodity with a gross value of \$464,397,000. Alfalfa was the second-largest commodity, and held a gross value \$251,683,000.

Head lettuce was third with a gross value of \$225,349,00 and broccoli came in at fourth with a gross value of \$132,228,000.

Leaf lettuce listed next at fifth with a value of \$124,120,00, and Bermuda came in as the sixth top commodity, holding a gross value of \$99,329,000.

The remaining four Top 10 commodities were all vegetable crops: carrots in the eighth position at \$63,391,000, onions at nine with a value of \$62,802,000, and finally spinach tenth with a value of \$62,362,000.

"The Crop Report and the Crop Report Plus can be picked up today, here or at the Agricultural Commissioner Office, for free anytime we are open," Ortiz said.

The University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Cooperative Extension Agronomy and Weed Management Advisor for Imperial, Oli Bachie, and Live Stock Advisor, Brooke Latack, presented on what they believed will be Imperial County's new emerging crop: moringa.

According to Latack and Bachie, *moringa oleifera* is a fast-growing, drought-resistant tree native to the Indian subcontinent, also known as drumstick tree, horseradish tree, ben oil tree, and benzolive tree.

Touting this tree as a superfood, Latack explained that every part of the tree is edible by both humans and livestock, and packs an extremely nutritious punch.

Research released on the university of California's website supports Latack and Bachie's assertions, with the leaves alone being 30% protein, while also containing high levels of vitamins A and C, calcium, zinc, iron, magnesium and potassium.

According to this same report, moringa has been consumed – mainly in parts of Southeast Asia – for centuries, its leaves having pepper-like taste similar to arugula.

The report described the young pods as reminiscent of Chinese long beans with a hint of spice, while the seeds can be eaten or boiled to make salad oil. The fragrant flowers are often used to make tea.

While Bachie said many take the plants and compress them into pellets for livestock, Latack added that the trees can just be planted in pastures for livestock to graze on naturally, though the Cooperative Extension has not yet been able to grow the plant.

"We have tried once, but we believe we planted it too late in the season so it was too hot for it...," Bache said.

"We are going to try again when it's cooler, and we are confident that they will do very well here," he said.