

# Rugged tomato lures Yank to Peru

## Scientist races time for seeds

Jon Fobes is a young man with a dream. To follow that dream, he's willing to endure weeks of roughing it that most of us would rather just read about.

Fobes, 28, a plant geneticist at Michigan State University, leaves next week for two months in the wilds of Peru. For the first month or so, while he's in the Peruvian Andes, he'll have company. The second month, Fobes will travel alone into the Amazon valley in a rented car jolting along primitive dirt roads and inching along the edge of 1,000-foot drops dotted with little white crosses which mark where people have plunged to their death.

He'll probably be sick several times while he's there. During his last trip, contaminated water and unfamiliar food took their toll on his health, landing him in the hospital twice. But he shrugs it off as something that happens.

"Why is Fobes going to endure all this? He wants to collect tomato seeds. Peru is the original home of the tomato plant, and our cultivated species still has several wild relatives there. Fobes' aim is to collect seeds of



"THE WILD TOMATO, I PRESUME?"

these wild tomatoes while they're still available.

"Time is the critical factor," he explains. "Agriculture in Peru is changing — it's becoming more Americanized, and large areas of land are being cleared. The wild tomatoes are being destroyed. In five years, they may be gone."

These plants are important, he says, because they are hardy and resistant to some diseases and pests that attack cultivated tomato varieties. Because wild and cultivated tomato varieties can be hybridized — sexually crossed — plant breeders can use the wild species as a kind of gene bank. Some of the wild species are readily

available in this country. Others, particularly the species that Fobes will be looking for, have been collected very rarely.

"Tomatoes are the most important vegetable crop in the United States," Fobes points out. "They provide more nutrition to the human diet than any other vegetable, not because they are so nutritious, but because we eat so many of them."

Five years of working with tomato species and his previous collecting trip have taught Fobes what to look for, when to go, which areas to visit and how many of each species to bring back. He'll gather the fruits of a plant population — all the plants from one area — pick out the seeds and dry them, and then pop them into plastic film canisters fastened to a board, being careful to keep all the seeds from each plant separate from all the rest. This board is his only piece of special equipment.

On his last trip, it may have kept him out of jail.

"I was going north from Peru into Ecuador," he relates. "Usually the only Americans going there from Peru are involved in the drug trade. The border official who took my passport wasn't about to believe that I was collecting tomato seeds. He was sure it was a lie — and a bad lie, at that. After about two hours, I finally showed him the board with the canisters of tomato seeds. Only then did I get my passport back and his OK to be on my way."

# State OKs work on Woodward, Northwestern

Woodward Avenue and Northwestern Highway will be the subject of \$300,000 in road improvements in the next six months.

Bids will be taken on those and 21 other road and airport maintenance projects by the state Transportation Department Jan. 10.

The Northwestern Highway project, which the state estimates will cost about \$150,000, will consist of repairing and upgrading signs on five miles of the highway from Eight Mile north to Lahser Road in Southfield.

The department said the project is expected to be completed in June.

The Woodward Avenue project will consist of replacing 1.2 miles of concrete curbs and gutters in Birmingham. The project is also expected to cost about \$150,000 and will be limited to the Woodward stretch between Maple Road and Big Beaver Road. It also has a June completion date.

The highway department also announced that Oakland County did not qualify snow removal assistance funds.

Forty-five of Michigan's 83 counties recorded more than 80 inches of snow last winter, qualifying them for annual assistance payments from the state's gas and weight taxes.

Those counties will share nearly \$2 million. Last year, 35 counties qualified to share about \$1.9 million.

Keweenaw County, the northernmost area of the Upper Peninsula, recorded the most snowfall last winter, 208.3 inches.

Houghton County, however, will receive the largest share of the snow-removal assistance funds. Having recorded nearly 194 inches last year, Houghton County will receive more than \$100,000.

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