

# Sugar substitute replacing tobacco crops

By Duane Stanford, Bloomberg

The once-idled leaf-processing machines at a former tobacco trading house in Alma, Ga., are coming back to life. Except now the warehouse, which still smells of tobacco leaves and cigarette smoke, is becoming a hub for a sweeter crop: stevia.

Approved for commercial use in the U.S. five years ago, stevia extracts are fast becoming the sugar substitute of choice for a population trying to slim down and avoid artificial options. The no-calorie, natural sweetener, derived from plants grown mostly in China and South America, is creating an opportunity for U.S. farmers and processors looking to make up for dwindling tobacco demand and sell to the likes of Cargill and Coca-Cola.

Stevia may one day command about a third of the \$58 billion global sweetener market, according to Stevia First, a grower in Yuba City.

U.S. tobacco output, meanwhile, has slid by half over the past 20 years. Since the two leaves can be handled using the same planting equipment, harvesters, drying barns, and loaders, processors are urging farmers to switch to stevia.

"I can remember 25 years ago when there were 300 tobacco farmers here," says Julian Rigby, 62, a farmer who's traded his tobacco fields near the Alma facility for stevia plots. "Today there's one."

Stevia, named after the 16th century botanist Petrus Jacobus Stevus, and tobacco have a lot in common. They can grow in similar soil and climates. Both leaves are picked, separated from their stems, and dried. But unlike cigarettes and other

tobacco products, extracts from the stevia herb are “generally recognized as safe,” says the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

That’s been a godsend for food manufacturers who have fought a backlash against sugar, fat, and salt as obesity rates ballooned in recent decades.

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