

Valley holds on to the crown as country's aloe capital

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MERCEDES About 250 tons of spiny green aloe vera plants are fed into the chutes each week at the Lily of the Desert factory in Mercedes. What comes out is more than 40 different products, ranging from shampoos and pills to soaps and juices that are shipped all over the world. Aloe vera is more than just an additive in sunburn lotions. The Rio Grande Valley's warm, semi-arid climate makes it one of the key aloe vera-producing regions in the United States. Hundreds of acres of organic aloe grown in the Valley and four processing centers in the Valley produce millions of gallons of aloe products a year, in addition to shipping the aloe juice to skin care and health food producers throughout the world. "It's a steadily growing industry," said Arturo Diaz, plant manager at the Mercedes factory. "It (aloe) is used to promote good digestion, people use it as antibiotic and one of the big uses is personal hygiene." But the Valley is one of the very few places in the country that still hangs on to the aloe vera industry. American farms only grow about 650 acres of aloe vera, most of that in the Rio Grande Valley, according to the International Aloe Science Council. The plants thrive in warm climates, while frost and freezes can kill aloe in six to eight hours. Few places in the United States are suitable for growing aloe, said Gene Hales, executive director of the International Aloe Science Council. There are some farms in Arizona, southern California and Florida, but high land prices in those areas and yearly freezes make growing the plant risky and expensive. Mexico and Asia grow most of the world's aloe, but a hearty industry exists in the Valley. "About 95 percent of all the aloe farming in (North America) is done in South Texas or in northern Mexico," Hales said. Labor in northern Mexico is much cheaper than the United States and the country's Gulf Coast has abundant rains with warmer year-round temperatures, Hales said. But with four separate manufacturing plants in the Valley, aloe is still a cash crop for a handful of Valley farmers. "There used to be more aloe here, but a lot of it has moved to Mexico," said Willy Thoeni, a Cameron County aloe farmer. The plant is also a key ingredient in thousands of skin care products and some healthy food products, many of which are manufactured here in the Valley. Even much of the products manufactured elsewhere in the United States has origins in aloe vera juice from the Valley. Aloe's soothing qualities make it a favorite in lotions and sunburn creams and some claim it has internal health qualities. Aloe's history in the Valley is a short one compared to other popular crops that farmers have grown here since the area was settled at the end of the 19th century. However, in places like Mexico aloe has long been used to heal cuts and for other medicinal purposes and started to grow in popularity in the United States during the 1910s. Companies started growing and processing aloe in the Valley in the 1960s and 1970s. Lily of the Desert in Mercedes is one of the country's largest producers of organic aloe products, Diaz said. The Mercedes factory, which has been here since 1971, makes all the products for the Lily of the Desert brand. It also makes juice and vitamin products for GNC and Sam's Club, but its' biggest seller is the pure aloe vera juice, which comes in small bottles and large jugs. Lily also sells products by its own name. Those can be found at some local stores or on the Internet. While Diaz won't make claims, he said many people drink the product because it promotes healthy digestion and overall good health. Some also use it for healing cuts, although there is very little scientific evidence to back that up. Lily gets most of their aloe products from northern Mexico along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico between Tampico and Ciudad Victoria. It also gets some from a contracted farm in Cameron County. Thoeni farms about 80 acres of organic aloe in Santa Rosa for Lily of the Desert. He said contracting his crop is the only way to sell the product, which doesn't sell on spot markets like corn, cotton, sugar or other Valley cash crops. His 80-acre field will yield about 3 million pounds of the crop a year, enough to make about 175,000 gallons of aloe vera juice. "There's no market for it outside of these few companies," said Thoeni, whose family has been growing the crop since the early 1980s. The crops, he said, are easy to manage, but also risky because of the susceptibility to freezing. Flooding can also drown the plant. A few inches of rain earlier this spring drowned nearly one quarter of his crop, wilting the plants and turning them brown. Farmers have welcomed recent rains, however, saying the weather has been a much-needed break from scorching summer temperatures. Harvesting the aloe from the plants is easy, Thoeni said. The small, cactus-like leaves are cut from the stem by workers and tossed onto a truck. Unlike many other plants, aloe can be harvested year round and a half-dozen workers can easily harvest an 80-acre field three or four times a year, repeating the process as new leaves mature on the plants. Quick accessibility to local crops for Valley plants helps keep local farmers in business. That allows aloe factories here to operate year round when heavy rains shut down Mexico roads. Aloe Laboratory in Harlingen grows about 150 acres of aloe vera on farms in La Feria and Harlingen. The company is owned by Japan's Green Harmony, which makes moisturizing lotions and first aid gels. It employs about 80 people. Again, the company's primary retail product is the aloe vera juice, but it mostly sells processed aloe vera to other manufacturers, said Mike Hernandez, operations and logistics manager for Aloe Laboratory. "Slowly as word gets out there, people want it in their products or in their juice," Hernandez said. Aloe Farms has 75 acres in Los Fresnos as well as a manufacturing plant that employs 20 people. "We have our own brand but we also package for companies like Sun Harvest, Whole Foods and Wild Oats," said Catherine Berry, marketing director for the family and daughter of the owner. Forever Living products also has Valley farms and a manufacturing facility in Mission.

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