

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Rolling with It

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With a contraption that's similar to the ones used to make candy like Lemon-heads and Jawbreakers, Justin Bender is working on pelleting portulaca seed in the Ball Premier Lab. For more than 23 years, Ball has been turning raw seed into single and multi-seed pellets.

If you've ever ordered pelleted seed, you recognize the bright yellow color. A proprietary, custom-blended powder is mixed in-house and used to build up smaller seed, like begonia and petunia, and make it into a consistent pellet that goes through seeders easily and is more visible in soil.



What Justin is doing is spraying a wetting agent on the portulaca seed so that the yellow powder continues to stick, adding layers upon layers. Production Supervisor Brenda Roysdon compares the process to the skin of an onion—but instead of peeling away the layers, you add them.

When you read this, the busy pelleting season (which starts in September) for the Ball Premier Lab will be over—just in time for your peak time to ramp up. But that doesn't mean that pelleting is done. "Seed is being processed every day of the year," said Robert Conrad, Seed Technology Research Manager.

Teresa Johnson, who's the manager of the Ball Premier Lab, said that starting in February until early fall they begin to plan for the future—replenishing product that's running low, increasing inventory on high-volume crops and working on special projects with new crops.

It's also the best time to train new employees, which can take anywhere from one to three months for the simpler processes. When Justin first started, he practiced on "dummy seed" for four weeks before he was given real seed. And that's just for single-seed pellets—for the multi-seed pellets, it takes six to 12 months to be fully trained. The end goal is always the highest quality, and because pelleting is such a hands-on process,

it takes some time for a person to become a true expert, said Brenda.

Between pelleting, coating and priming, about five billion seeds go through the lab in a year. That would be a lot of Lemonheads.