

Coming back

With sand in the bottoms of suitcases, skinned knees from rafting, and maybe a sore back from working in the yard, the Aggies returned

from spring break Sunday. Dennis Delaune, right, helps Patty Bell move back. Battalion photo by Jana Hazlett

Petroculture — forerunner to drought-resistant crops

ng oil and rubber are the forerunners of a new agricultural study at

The new agricultural field is called petroculture. Using crops that can be grown on semi-arid soils with little or no irri-

gation, the plants are capable of producing oil, rubber and lubricants even a replacement for sperm hale oil. Great interest is being hown here for three crops in paricular: guayule (wy-oo-lee), jojoba no-ho-ba), and euphorbia (you-

All are drought-resistant plants which grow in the desert regions of many Southwest states, including

The strategic value of these new ops is immeasurable to a nation pendent on imports," said Dr. an Bragg, a Texas A&M industrial conomist. "The first of the plants that will be cultiviated on a large scale will probably be jojoba." Bragg was part of a delegation of Texas A&M scientists testifying this

k before a special meeting of the exas House of Representatives abcommittee on Alternate Energy urces for Agriculture.

The jojoba seed resembles a small

green olive. Approximately 60 percent of its weight is a light yellow, odorless, liquid wax.

"This wax is almost identical to sperm whale oil, a key industrial ludical." cant," said Bragg. Sperm whale il is used in automatic transmission uids, electrical insulation and for ther lubrication of precision in-

Since 1971, however, the sperm hale has been declared an dangered species and importation its products into the United ates has been forbidden," Bragg endangered species and importation of its products into the United

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countries with shaky governments, Energy crops capable of produc- said. "With that restriction, industry has been pressed hard to develop synthetic substitutes. As a result, jojoba oil is much in demand. Current world prices are about \$5

> In the late 1960s, about 44 million pounds of sperm whale oil were imported by the United States each year, he said

Another plant showing a high de-gree of promise for future agricultural ecomonics is the guayule.
Guaylue produces rubber — rub-

ber in quantities of 2 to 15 percent of the plant's dry weight. It is chem-ically and physically identical to that produced by the Asian rubber tree. Guayule grows wild in Southwest Texas and northern Mexico.

"When rubber supplies were cut off during World War II, the United States spent \$45 million on the successful Emergency Rubber Project developing guayule as a domestic source of natural rubber," said

Bragg.
"However, in 1946, with renewed availability of Asian rubber and the development of synthetic rubber made from low-cost petroleum, the guayule project was dismantled," he

Conditions have changed considerably since World War II.

Prices of both synthetic and natural rubber have soared. The security of both products is more unsure today than it has been since 1946, he added. The United States in 1976 imported almost 700,000 tons of natural rubber, at a cost of one-half billion dollars.

Any increase in the development of guayule will have an effect in

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It's been estimated that world demand will outstrip consumption in 1985 by as much as one million tons," he said. "This increased demand provides a golden opportunity for crop diversification by farmers in Texas and other Southwestern

Another plant being studied is the euphorbia. Called the "gasoline tree," the bush contains a latex simi-

lar to crude oil.

In the wild, euphorbia will yield two to 10 barrels of crude oil per acre, at a cost of \$3 to \$10 per barrel, said the Texas A&M scientist. It is possible genetic improvement could raise this to as much as 10 to 50 barrels per year. It is a low-sulfur

This plant offers an opportunity for the United States to grow its own oil," said Bragg. "However, the magnitude of such an undertaking would be staggering. An area the size of Arizona would have to be cultivated with plants producing 40 barrels per acre to meet the needs of the nation's current gasoline requirements.

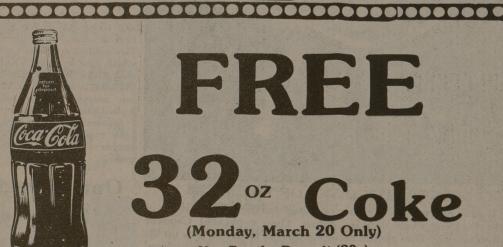
"It has advantages, too," he said. Euphorbia is a renewable resource that is under our own control, rather than a foreign government. The plant is a resource without lethal hazards, such as radiation or air pollution. Finally, it uses land that is not presently suitable for the production of food and fiber."

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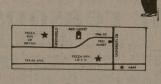
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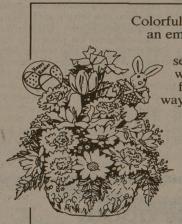
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