Specialty and High-Value Crops for N.C. Producers

The Need: Agriculture and agribusiness – food, fiber and forestry industries, broadly defined – constitute North Carolina’s leading industries. They contribute nearly $70 billion in annual income and 630,000 jobs to the state’s economy. But increased global competition, changing government support programs and urban development all pose significant challenges to these industries and the workers they support.

Serving the Need: As the face of North Carolina agriculture changes, more opportunities are emerging for small farmers and those who are diversifying into niche markets. The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences is helping these farmers develop high-value alternative crops, markets and enterprises that are profitable.

For example, the North Carolina Specialty Crops Program helps farmers statewide grow and market high-value crops such as fruits, vegetables, industrial crops, niche crops, herbs and other specialty items, as well as develop value-added products and new agricultural enterprises. In 2005, the program helped growers earn $16 million for cantaloupes; $10 million for red seedless watermelons; and $3 million for Sprite melons.

And in Western North Carolina, Madison Farms is breathing new life into a formerly tobacco-dependent community by helping local growers bring their produce to market. Led by the Madison County center of North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Madison Farms operates a value-added processing center that provides farmers with the equipment and supplies to wash, package and store their produce. Madison Farms then markets and sells the produce to a growing customer base that includes local school systems and universities, bringing increased revenue to growers and healthy meals to local students.

Cooperative Extension also is working across the state to establish thriving farmers’ markets – many operating year-round – that open doors to increased revenue for growers of niche and organic crops.

Impact beyond North Carolina: As North Carolina agriculture continues to change, the College is developing new technologies and innovative crops as well as providing programs and services that bolster sustainable agriculture, local food systems and profitability for farmers of all types throughout the state.

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