

Considering Specialty Crops?

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Over the years in extension I have often had opportunity to consult with folks interested in growing specialty crops. Many have experience with other agricultural crops and have been farming for years, some are already involved in some aspect of specialty crop farming, while a fair share are new growers with limited experience. Many have preconceptions and are idealistic in their goals; others being more practically grounded. However, regardless of their background, there are important considerations that should be understood in all situations before one commits time, materials, labor and other expenses:

1. How serious are you? Do you have the land, equipment, time and finances, and above all the dedication to see the venture through? Education about growing crops is readily accessible; that is what we here in extension are all about. And while the above things can be bought or borrowed, maintaining a sustained interest and dedication on an often-bumpy road takes much perseverance and a special personality to see it through to success.
2. Evaluate the potential market carefully. This should be the top consideration. As a horticulturist, I can tell you it is possible to successfully grow many crops, however it is not always an easy thing to successfully sell them and make money at it. Developing a good marketing strategy requires much leg-work on the part of the grower through market assessment and research, networking with buyers, suppliers and knowledgeable others, and continuous planning. Unless you hire-out this work, you are the one to make it happen. Even a proposed "Pick Your Own" operation is more than just growing the crop and hanging up sign. To be successful the competition should be evaluated in at least a 50-mile radius, and advertising media should be identified and used. Then comes the whole aspect of customer service and dealing with people on your farm. Are you a people person? In my experience it is the rare farmer who likes to deal with crowds of people, usually this falls to someone else in the family. Consider your location and proximity to population. How do you get produce to them, or how do you get them to the produce? Remember the old produce growers' adage: "Sell it or Smell it".
3. Are you involving all members of your family in planning this venture? All should be on board with the project and share the vision. In addition, in the most successful operations I have seen, there is recognition of those who are good at selling and marketing and those who find their talents in the field. It is the rare person who can pull off both areas well. So strive for division of labor among family and/or hired staff.
4. Evaluate your labor pool. This is one of the most common stumbling blocks for prospective growers. While a large interested family or extended family may be a major asset, keep in mind most specialty crops, from field to market, can be labor intensive. There may be a time when one must hire extra help to get the job done. Management of labor has its own challenges, and requires a move from self-direction to directing others. Summer help from kids out of school is the most common labor source for a small farm. However as I have heard from many, unless you are fortunate to get farm kids with experience and work ethic, you will be the one to instill these attributes. For many kids there is much easier summer work to be found (at often better pay) than stoop harvest in the hot sun all day. For experienced or migrant labor, forget minimum wages and be prepared to pay above \$8.00 an hour. Riding a lawn mower at a golf course and fast food

restaurant work will often pay at least this or more, so recognize there is competition for general labor. Planning ahead for labor needs at peak times is important and not doing so will result in a valuable crop rotting in the field.

5. Plan crops according to market demand. Recognize that some crops, though common, are staples, and items customers know and buy regularly. They can be your bread and butter. Good examples are tomatoes, cucumbers, summer squash or apples. Grow and offer seasonal "power items". Examples are sweet corn, strawberries, asparagus, and peaches. Do not be afraid to buy certain items from off the farm to supplement your offerings. Studies have shown that customers are forgiving in this aspect, especially if it was locally grown. But do plan on developing a crop or crops that provides recognition for your operation, and do a better job at quality and price with these than the competition. One of the best things to learn early is to focus on a few crops and learn to do them well before expanding. Buy what you need to fill out your market offerings in the interim. Most disasters are from those who start out too big or with too many crops, and this is especially magnified when the grower has little growing experience. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the work required, spread too thinly and discouraged by resulting loss.

6. Know the production aspects of chosen crops and plan carefully. There is much easily found information about growing specialty crops. Utilize your local county extension agriculture agent to assist in site development and planning of your venture. This person will have a wide range of knowledge about soils, crops, market and other important issues as related to growing and selling locally. Most land-grant colleges have specific publications both in print and on internet web-sites. Cooperative extension is also involved in workshops and conferences and other production meetings in which specialists and other experts deliver pertinent information to producers.

7. Know and prepare your site well. There are many local factors that dictate the suitability of your farm site for certain crops. This includes among other things, soil type and drainage, slope and elevation, seasonal water table characteristics, frost proneness, wildlife pressure, field weed history, and of great importance, access to irrigation water. You should plan on irrigation for specialty crops, and consider water source, quantity, quality and delivery method. Grown-over sites should be managed for a year in advance to eliminate perennial weeds and reduce annual weed seed populations. For some crops like blueberries, a radical drop in soil pH may be required. This is a slow process, often taking a year or more for amendments to change soil characteristics. Soil tests will indicate needs for nutrient adjustments, with phosphorus and potassium key elements for build-up before planting. Cover crops have many soil building advantages and should be planted the year prior. Common field crop production on a site for several years can be an asset for site preparation, eliminating weeds and building soils. Always be aware of herbicide carry-over problems when following corn or soybeans with specialty crops.

These are just a few important considerations for new growers. Careful planning both in marketing and production, avoiding getting in a hurry, starting slow and building slowly, developing crop focus and seeking education on a continual basis is a sure recipe for success.

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