

Speciality Crop Research Provides Growers Farming Alternatives

PIKETON, Ohio — The next time you find eggplant, cluster tomatoes, or seedless cucumbers at your local grocery store, check the label. The crops may be Ohio-grown.

Promising research results, coupled with a growing market demand and potential profit, are giving state growers an opportunity to supplement or expand their business from traditional field crops to specialty fruits and vegetables.

The Ohio State University Piketon Agricultural Research and Extension Center has taken the reins in the field of speciality crop research, studying the economic and environmental feasibility of successfully growing cash crops in Ohio, both in the field and in the greenhouse.

"The idea of growing income-producing crops in Ohio has really taken off," said Brad Bergefurd, OSU extension agent for the Centers at Piketon. "We've collected enough data from 1995, 1996, and 2000 to know that raising speciality crops is a pretty good recommendation for growers. The market is definitely there for it."

Researchers at the Centers at Piketon are studying a smorgasbord of speciality crops, including berries, tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, the Asian eggplant, bitter

melon and the sweet potato, and the techniques that would provide the best yields both in the greenhouse and under Ohio's climate.

Greenhouse crop production is of special interest for farmers, specifically tobacco growers. Said Bergefurd, "Tobacco growers traditionally have their own greenhouses and they are looking for alternative crops to raise in between tobacco growing. Plus, they have all this space in the greenhouse that is not being utilized in the off season."

Innovative and revamped greenhouse growing techniques have allowed researchers to focus on speciality tomatoes, such as cherry tomatoes and cluster tomatoes like those grown in Holland, seedless cucumbers, raspberries, strawberries and leafy and bibb types of lettuces.

"We can grow the raspberry plants throughout the summer, chill them down in the fall, defrost them in the greenhouse and force fruit production and harvest the next March or April," said Bergefurd. "And the berries are of better quality because they are not exposed to typical outdoors environmental conditions. The technology, originated in New York was just revamped for southern Ohio conditions."

Researchers have also

adopted the float bed technique popular with tobacco farmers to vegetable production. The system, involving plant-filled Styrofoam trays floating on a bed of water, supports a variety of green vegetables and herbs, including leaf lettuce, mizuna spinach, mint, and basil.

Greenhouse production at the center involves hydroponic strawberries, a project sparked by growers who were interested in raising berries all season. "We are looking at berries grown in pots and in bags and comparing the two systems to see which one produces the best growing situation without sacrificing yield," said Christie Welch, horticulture program research assistant.

Field studies at the Centers at Piketon have seen success in growing Asian eggplant and bitter melon, two exotic fruits that have found a niche in Ohio's growing Asian and Mediterranean markets. The crops, which have adapted well to Ohio's climate and appear to resist major insects and diseases, are a hit with statewide produce markets looking for a local supplier of exotic and unusual commodities.

"Produce buyers are very

pleased that the crops are grown locally and that they may be able to secure a local supply," said Matt Kleinhenz, Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center researcher. "On several occasions, produce buyers have indicated that they will work with their growers to secure these new commodities."

That's good news for farmers looking to raise a new product. And if consumer

demand is not convincing enough, a bountiful pocket-book just might be. Specialty crops, such as raspberries and strawberries for example, generate a higher rate of return than traditional crops. Though the process is labor intensive, initially expensive and involves several years of patience, the end results can be profitable for a farmer. For example, strawberries generate 30 times more profit per acre than no-till soybeans.

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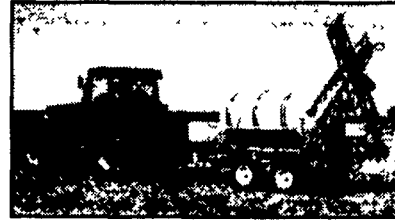


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