

Small-Scale Specialty Crop Farming is Changing in North Dakota

Keith Knudson, North Dakota Farm Management Education Program Specialty Crop Instructor at Dakota College at Bottineau keith.a.knudson@dakotacollege.edu or 701-228-5489

Specialty crop farmers in North Dakota are more abundant than one would think. It is interesting to note that our specialty crop farmers in North Dakota are not very well represented in the USDA statistics. The 2017 USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service reported 35 vegetable producers and 10 fruit and nut growers in the state of North Dakota. For the past ten years, I have been a Farm Management Education Program Instructor working mainly with specialty crop farmers across the state of North Dakota. I know of more than 250 vegetable growers in the state!

USDA's specialty crop list includes fruits and tree nuts, vegetables, culinary herbs and spices, medicinal plants, as well as nursery, floriculture, and horticulture crops. North Dakota's specialty crop farmers raise mainly vegetables but there are also a number of fruit and culinary herb growers.

On the surface, specialty crop farming such as growing vegetables does not seem to be all that complex. However, there are quite a few agronomic and business management decisions that need to be made throughout the year. Every farmer that I have assisted has a diverse cropping system and it often includes livestock as well as value-added products. The typical specialty crop producer in North Dakota will grow 15 to 20 different crops with each crop requiring a plan. The plan includes succession planting, spacing out plantings of the same vegetable every two to four weeks or switching from cool season to warm season and then back to cool season crops, on the same field, all within four months. The farmer utilizes an integrated pest management program that protects the crops yet allows beneficial insects such as pollinators and soil microorganism to thrive. A diverse cropping system that produces high yields requires a balance with nature.

Harvesting the crops may start in early June and go well into September of each year. By the time harvesting has started a marketing plan needs to be in place. The producer must decide on the marketing channel or a combination of marketing channels. Marketing channels include direct customer sales such as farm stand, farmers markets, CSAs, and pick-your-own. Indirect market channels are sales to restaurants, grocery stores, schools, and wholesalers. Harvesting involves picking the produce, sorting, cleaning, and packaging. Sorting varies depending on the customer. Usually, direct customers are willing to take produce with blemishes and various sizes. Indirect customers such as restaurants prefer the farmer provide produce that meets a sizing standard based on produce diameter and grading for uniformity, maturity, color, damage, and cleanliness.

A food safety plan is usually documented by the farmer that includes use of food safety practices for all activities from the purchasing of seed through the delivery of the product to the customer. This plan is developed and followed with the intention of keeping the farmer's customers safe and satisfied.

In the past, crop insurance has been overlooked but it is becoming a very important part of the specialty crop farming enterprise. On October 6, 2021 USDA introduced a crop insurance for farmers who sell locally. It is called the Micro Farm policy and is offered through Whole-Farm Revenue Protection (WFRP). The Policy is available to farms with revenue of \$100,000 or less. It provides easy access to the program which requires no expense or individual commodity reporting needed and simplifies recordkeeping requirements. Revenue from post-production activities, such as cleaning and packaging as well as value-added products, are allowable as revenue. This crop insurance is sold through private crop insurance agents.

Recordkeeping and financial planning become more important as the farm grows. Records are kept to analyze each crop's potential for profitability and to assist in determining which crops will be planted in the upcoming year. Records are kept on pests which will assist in crop rotation practices. Often vegetable farmers will have open fields and high tunnels. Each location will provide ideal growing conditions for specific crops. Both locations are important to the farm's profitability and must be used to maximize whole farm profit.

The North Dakota Farm Management Education Program provides lifelong learning opportunities in economic and financial management for persons involved in the farming and ranching business. Visit ndfarmmanagement.com, Facebook @NDFarmManagementEducation, or contact Craig Kleven, State Supervisor for Agricultural Education, at crkleven@nd.gov or 701-328-3162 for more information. The ND Farm Management Education Program is sponsored by the North Dakota Department of Career and Technical Education.