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North Carolina Specialty Crops Program Newsletter

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Featured Specialty Crops Program Farmer

James Sharp, Fresh-Pik Produce Inc. Wilson, NC



The Specialty Crops Program (SCP) newsletter will be featuring farmers that the program has helped over the years. This month we traveled to Wilson, NC to talk with James Sharp of Fresh-Pik Produce Inc.

Sharp has been involved with the SCP since 1997 and attributes 75% of his income to the program. When asked how the SCP has benefitted him most Sharp said, "due to the program a lot of risk have been reduced as far as knowing what varieties are best suited for North Carolina." Sharp contributed better production methods to the program as well and stated that without the SCP, Fresh-Pik Produce Inc. would be non-existent and he would probably be growing grain.

Sharp states that his quality and quantity have improved as a result of the program, and North Carolina's produce image has been improved because of the Specialty Crops program. The program has given North Carolina produce a national image of product innovation and produce quality. The program has brought the best produce merchandisers to the state and given us an opportunity to develop an image we would not have been able to any other way.

He was asked, where would you like to see the SCP go from here? Sharp's response was that he would like to see it continue to keep looking at new and old Specialty Crops and crops for market.

There is always something better, no crop is perfect but with extensive research they can be. To achieve this, Sharp suggest continued trial and error studies both on-farm and at research stations.

When asked how the research, extension and marketing aspect of the SCP has benefitted him he said, "The research has enabled me to grow lettuce both in the spring and fall, improve my Sprite melon industry and production of yellow and red flesh seedless watermelons." Sharp contributes better production practices and higher yields to the extension part of the program and says that the marketing aspect helped develop a market for Sprite melons and other specialty items, through in-store demos and taste testing.

Sharp is the marketing person for the Southeastern Growers Association (SGA) and was asked how the Specialty Crops Program has benefitted the SGA. According to Sharp, 100% of the SGA's profit comes from specialty crops, and stated that without the program the SGA would not exist and because of the program growers are achieving higher yields, consistent production year to year and the best quality in the state. Sharp was asked what benefits the research, extension and marketing aspects the SGA has received from the SCP. His response was, the SGA has been able to identify proper harvest procedures for Sprite melons, plant spacing and population has improved and an abundance of melon varieties have been introduced for production. The extension has been beneficial in helping with crop disease management and the marketing has provided cost share with the in-store demos.

In all, Sharp is very pleased with his experiences with the Specialty Crops Program.

Current Research Projects

In-service Training at Cunningham Research Station

A cucurbit in-service training was held at the Cunningham Research Station, Kinston, NC on Wednesday, July 23 and

Thursday, July 24. This special agent training coincided with the Specialty Crops Melon and Watermelon Field Day on July 24th. Approximately 12 agents attended the cucurbit in-service training.

Topics of discussion included an overview of the cucurbit industry presented by Dr. Jonathan Schultheis, NCSU; Biology of the crop presented by Bill Jester, NCSU; Fresh Marketing of Crops presented by Nick Augustini, NCDA&CS; Pest Management and Importance of IR-4 presented by Roger Batts, NCSU; Key Diseases of Cucurbit and their control, Dr. Gerald Holmes, NCSU; Key Weeds of Cucurbit and their Control, Dr. Katie Jennings, NCSU; Key Insect of Cucurbit and their Control, Dr. Mark Abney, NCSU. A tour of TC Smith Produce in Seven Springs, NC was taken and the melon packaging operations were outlined. Once back at Raymond P. Cunningham Research Station the melon plots were toured and melon taste testing was performed.



North Carolina Specialty Crops Program host the National Cotton Council

On July 22, 2008, Bill Jester, Extension Associate & Horticulturist and Specialty Crops Program Coordinator presented a brief summary presentation of the SCP history to the National Cotton Council along with a taste testing of various types of melons afterwards. This was an informal yet informational meeting.



Specialty Crops Melon and Watermelon Field Day



The Specialty Crops Melon and Watermelon field day was hosted by the Raymond P. Cunningham Research Station (RPCRS) in Kinston, NC on July 24, 2008. Approximately 60 growers, industry consultants and technical people attended the field day.

The field day began with Dr. Johnny Wynne, Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Science, NCSU; Richard Reich, Agricultural Services Assistant Commissioner, NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services; Rep. Van Braxton, NC General Assembly; Phillip Winslow, Superintendent, Cunningham Research Station; and Bill Jester, Extension Associate & Horticulturist and NC Specialty Crops Coordinator, Department of Horticultural Science, NCSU welcoming everyone to field day. Available for sampling and taste testing were various varieties of melons grown on Cunningham Research Station, Kinston, NC. The taste test was conducted by Nick Augostini, Marketing Specialist, NCDA&CS and staff.



An informative presentation was given by Dr. Todd Wehner, NCSU highlighting the various varieties of watermelon, seeded and seedless, and the different flesh types. Dr. Wehner outlined the genetic differences in the different varieties of watermelon and the genes that make the different flesh types and how to breed for these varieties.

Dr. Jonathan Schultheis, Professor, Department of Horticulture Science, NCSU and Brad Thompson, Department of Horticulture Science, NCSU; Bill Jester, Extension Associate & Horticulturist, and NC Specialty Crops Coordinator, Department of Horticultural Science, NCSU, and Allan Thornton, Extension

Agent Sampson County, Department of Horticultural Science, NCSU, gave a presentation on "Available or Potential New Yellow and Orange Flesh Watermelons", "Watermelon Grafting as an Option" and "Unique Melon Opportunities". Thornton discussed the various varieties of yellow and orange flesh watermelons and the pros and cons of those melons. Thornton cut some of the melon varieties for sampling and answered questions about these new varieties.



Brad Thompson discussed the grafting study and how the melons are grafted and the purpose of grafting melons. Thompson cut melons for sampling and answered question. Dr. Schultheis also spoke about the grafting study and explained more about the genetics of the study. Thompson discussed a spacing study and showed two petite varieties of red flesh watermelon and explained how the row spacing affects melon size.

Dr. Schultheis, Professor, Department of Horticultural Science, NCSU, and Bill Jester, NC Specialty Crops Coordinator & Extension Associate, Department of Horticultural Science, NCSU, discussed various varieties of specialty melons, and gave explanations of the melon types. Jester discussed the origin of some of the melons and told a brief history of them.



Bill Jester, Extension Associate & Horticulturist and NC Specialty Crops Coordinator, Department of Horticultural Science, NCSU, gave an informative presentation on "Honeydew Opportunities for North Carolina". Jester outlined the varieties and the proper way to assess ripeness to ensure that they are harvested at the correct time.

In the News

Specialty crops field day highlights research efforts

Article taken from the "Kinston Free Press" July 25, 2008 issue



Melon enthusiasts gathered Thursday at the Cunningham Research Station to see the latest innovations in specialty crops. Several North Carolina State University agricultural officials joined about 50 local farmers and crop researchers to discuss the state's role in producing alternative crops for the global market.

Rep. Van Braxton, D-Lenoir, also attended the 2008 Specialty Crops Melon and Watermelon field day. Braxton said he would continue to support the state's 18 specialty crop research stations. "The specialty crop program is valuable for farmers," he said.

Researchers continue to evaluate foreign markets and believe both Japan and China will prove to be viable consumers of specialty crops. Richard Reich, N.C. Department of Agriculture assistant commissioner, said he recently visited Japan.

"Japan spends \$600 billion a year on food and 60 percent of their food is imported," he said. "They are looking to buy high-end fruits."

As markets continue to grow globally, North Carolina's agriculture business is expanding in sales. For fiscal year 2008, state crop sales reached \$13.4 billion, according to N.C. State University, Dean of the College of Agriculture, Johnny Wynne.

"Agriculture is still very important in our state," he said. "There was \$3 million in sprite melon sales last year alone." The field day attendees touched, tasted and smelled hundreds of melons and watermelons on display. Crop breeder Todd Wehner explained the differences in hybrid cantaloupes and specialty watermelons. Red, orange, and yellow-fleshed watermelons were displayed, laying on the ground cut in half. "The new fad is everyone wants the mini-seedless watermelons," he said. "Sugar baby watermelons are also popular."

The Cunningham Research Station in Kinston was the first station in the state to begin developing breeder seeds for specialty crops. Bill Jester, specialty crops coordinator, said the program was started by farmers. "We are always looking for new crop varieties," he said.

In 1985, the late Raymond Cunningham donated 414 acres of land in Kinston to N.C. State University. The land is now used for the Cunningham Research Station, which conducts research on all aspects of horticultural and field crops.

Project creates new vegetable growers in North Carolina

excerpt taken from: "The Vegetable Growers News" July 2008 issue



North Carolina's Onslow County is not the easiest place to start a commercial vegetable farm. The obstacles are many. First, there's the limited availability of land. Located in the southeastern part of the state on the Atlantic coast, Onslow and the counties surrounding it are growing rapidly. Subdivisions are going up all over, which drives up the price of land dramatically. There are big farms, certainly, but most of them focus on traditional crops like tobacco, corn, soybeans, and cotton. The growers, most of who are getting up there in age, are used to farming with heavy equipment and aren't interested in raising labor-intensive vegetables.

When added to the pest and disease problems caused by the area's high heat and humidity, such obstacles make growing vegetables a difficult job. Difficult, but not impossible. That's the assessment of Mark Seitz and Larry Kent who are teaching Onslow County residents how to be successful vegetable farmers. Seitz, an area commercial horticulture agent for North Carolina Cooperative Extension, and Kent, manager of the Onslow County Farmers' Market in Jacksonville, see a lot of potential for vegetable growers in the region, despite all the obstacles.

Population growth, though it has its drawbacks, has increased the demand for local producers. There's also Camp

Lejeune to consider, a Marine Corps base that houses about 100,000 people. The Marines and their families are a highly transient population, but their world travels have given them a taste for exotic produce, a taste that isn't completely satisfied by eastern North Carolina's traditional vegetable crops, which include collard greens, cabbage, turnips, beets, tomatoes, squash, and cucumbers, Seitz said. The growing demand for local produce led Kent, Seitz and other Extension educators to create the Horticulture Enterprise Leadership Project (HELP), a class for aspiring vegetable growers.

Kent came up with the idea for HELP after three of the biggest produce vendors at the Onslow County Farmers' Market retired about three years ago. As the market manager, Kent had to figure out how to fill the shortage (a common problem in area markets, he said). He thought educating new growers might do the trick, so he approached the local Extension office for help.

Eight or nine people signed up for the first class, held in spring 2007. Seitz and Kent taught the class with help from Extension agents Robin Taylor, who teaches produce handling and food safety, and Jeff Morton, an expert on soil sampling. The classes are held on a half acre plot of land donated by Kent, who used to be a grower. He also gives access to a 20- by 100- foot high tunnel so students can learn the difference between growing outdoors and growing in a controlled environment.

There are two HELP classes per year, one in spring and one in fall. For 14 to 16 weeks each season, aspiring growers learn the particulars of growing vegetables in their regions- everything from production to marketing. The cost to take part is \$25 per person, which covers the cost of fertilizer, seed and other materials, Seitz said.

Classes are held on Friday evenings, for about two hours. The first half hour is dedicated to education and the rest of the session is dedicated to garden work such as planting, weeding and harvesting. When the vegetables are ready for harvest, two or three students sell them at the Onslow farmers' market on Saturday mornings. Each student is expected to volunteer one day a month at the market, which gives him or her experience selling and promoting a product. The market's board donated booth space to HELP and pays for the required product liability coverage up front. The class repays the insurance fee from the money it makes selling produce at the market. Whatever money is left over is divided among class participants, he said.

The class is open to anyone in Onslow County. (Seitz hopes to have similar programs in neighboring counties one day.) To date, participants include retirees from the Northeast who are unfamiliar with eastern North Carolina's climate, military families, kids, high school students, teachers, and people looking for second careers, salespersons, and farmers, according to Seitz.

"We're trying to get the group to realize that to be successful, you have to have something unique on the market, have a product that nobody else has," he said. For example, this spring the students experimented with pak choi, an Asian vegetable. They grew about 200 heads and sold them all in one day, he said. HELP is starting to make an impact. Twenty-two people signed up this spring. The project also has created two new vendors for the Onslow market, which now has six produce vendors- with room for more, Kent said.

One of the new vendors is Cheryl Davis. Her family owns a hog farm in Richlands, which gave her an advantage over other aspiring vegetable growers. She already had access to farmland and a small greenhouse.

Davis raised and sold pumpkins, gourds, Indian corn and mums on the farm before she and her husband signed up for HELP last fall. They saw an opportunity to tap into the demand for locally grown vegetables but wanted to gain a fundamental knowledge of raising produce before they really dived in, she said. HELP taught them the fundamentals of harvesting, marketing, seed, soil, nutrients, weed control, safe handling practices and much else. Davis also learned a bit about organic farming, which she might look into one day.

She joined the Onslow market last fall, where she started selling her pumpkins, gourds, and Indian corn. She anticipates good sales from the crops she learned to grow at HELP, including lettuce, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, tomatoes, and cucumber. The class also inspired her to look into purchasing a high tunnel to help with season extension, but she needs to generate more cash flow before she can do that, she said.

The Marketing Perspective

Recipes

from the "North Carolina Watermelon" brochure
(NCDA&CS)



Watermelon Mousse

2 ¼ cups pureed watermelon
1 cup sugar 1 T. lemon juice
1 envelope unflavored gelatin
1 cup heavy cream

To puree watermelon, remove seeds from about 2 ½ cups watermelon chunks. Puree in electric blender or by mashing through coarse sieve. Soften gelatin in ¼ cup cold watermelon puree. Heat 2 cups of pureed watermelon in a medium saucepan over low heat until almost boiling. Add softened gelatin and stir until dissolved. Remove from heat; add sugar and lemon juice. Chill, stirring occasionally, until the mixture mounds slightly when dropped from a spoon. Whip cream and fold in. Turn into a 4-cup mold. Freeze. Unmold and garnish with lemon slices, melon balls and mint sprigs. Makes 6 servings.

Watermelon Rind Pickles

7 pounds rind (1 medium melon)
3 ½ pounds (6 to 7 cups) sugar
1 pint vinegar ½ t. oil of cloves
½ t. oil of cinnamon

Cut off all green and pink parts of rind. Cut in cubes. Cover with hot water and boil 8 to 10 minutes or until tender. Drain. Make syrup of sugar, oils, and vinegar. Bring to a boil and pour over rind. Let stand overnight. Heat syrup for 2 mornings and pour over rind. Heat syrup and rind on 3rd morning. Pack in jars and seal.

NOTE: If a crisp pickle is desired, soak the rind in lime water several hours or overnight before beginning recipe. Remember to rinse very well if lime is used. (½ bottle slaked lime to ½ gallon water). Spice oil and lime is available at drug store.

Caribbean Watermelon Salsa

Jerk seasoning gives a tropical touch to this salsa. If not available in your markets, chopped jalapeno pepper may be substituted.

2 cups chopped seeded watermelon
1 cup chopped fresh pineapple
1 cup chopped onion ¼ cup orange juice
¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro
1 to 2 tablespoons jerk seasoning

In a large bowl, combine all ingredients; mix well. Refrigerate, cover, at least one hour to blend flavors. Stir before serving. Makes 8 servings.

*Jerk spices differ in hotness so start with 1 tablespoon seasoning for more tender palates.

North Carolina Watermelon

Facts

from the "North Carolina Watermelon" brochure
(NCDA&CS)

North Carolina produces about 7,400 acres of watermelon valued at over \$12.4 million.

North Carolina ranks about 8th in the nation, producing over 155.4 million pounds.

"The Fruit that Really is a Vegetable!"

The watermelon is of the Cucurbitaceae (or Gourd) family. Its origin, Africa, was established by David Livingstone (noted missionary explorer), in the 1850's. He found great tracts of watermelon growing wild in the Kalahari Desert of Africa. Cultivation by man dates back at least 4000 years to the Egyptians.

Specialty Melons Taste Testing

July 21, 2008
1st Health Market
170 Memorial Dr.
Pine Hurst, NC

in conjunction with the Moore County Farmers' Market. Conducted by NCDA&CS personnel. Melons were grown by Pressley Farms in Cameron, NC. Melons tested were Sugar Nut, Golden Lady, Honey Max, Rocio, NC Sparta and Sprite. Melons ranked from 5=excellent to 1=poor. The melon ranking the highest was Sugar Nut.

July 24, 2008
Specialty Melon and Watermelon Field Day, Raymond P. Cunningham Research Station, Kinston, NC
Conducted by the NCDA&CS personnel. Melons were grown through a NC Specialty Crops Program Grant. Melons tested were NC Stella, NC Star, NC Sparta, NC Sapphire, and Sprite. Melons ranked from 5=excellent to 1=poor. The melon ranking the highest was NC Star.

July 31, 2008
Southern Village, Chapel Hill, NC
Conducted by the NCDA&CS personnel,

Melons were grown by Howard McAdams a local farmer in Orange County. Melons tested were Sugar Nut, Golden Lady, Honey Max, Pixie, NC Star, and Sprite. Melons ranked from 5=excellent to 1=poor. **Postponed due to inclement weather.**



Upcoming Educational Programs

Mark your calendars for the "Getting Started in the Nursery Business" Workshop on September 24 from 9 am to 2 pm at the Mountain Horticultural Crops Research Station in Fletcher, NC. Topics to be covered include risk management, business planning, farm resource assessment, site selection, and marketing, plus a tour of nursery production at the research station. Registration fee of \$10 includes lunch.

Also in the works is a Specialty Cut Flower Workshop on October 16 from 9 am - 2 pm. Location to be advised. For more information about these programs, contact Jean Harrison, Buncombe County Extension Office, 828-255-5522 or Jean.Harrison@ncsu.edu.



2008 Field Day Dates:

August 7; Annual Tomato Field Day (pumpkin, gourds, and Squash), Mountain Horticultural Crops Research Station-Mills River, NC;

October 16; Pumpkin/Gourd Field Day, Mountain Research Station, Waynesville, NC

For additional information about the NC Specialty Crops Program visit our website at www.ncspecialtycrops.org