

Maybe It's Time to Try a Different Kind of Agriculture

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The best producers of traditional agricultural crops consistently apply cultural practices and marketing techniques aimed at realizing every cent of profit from every acre farmed. In today's economy such careful management is more important than ever. The traditional crops being grown in a particular region do, however, have their limits. There is only so much profit that can be squeezed per acre even after the best production practices and economics have been applied. Unfortunately, acres in production and profit per acre on a particular farm sometimes fail to "pencil out" at a level of sustainability. For those who have been farming on the edge of survival, maybe it's time to consider a different kind of agricultural operation. There are many with the potential to produce a much higher profit margin per acre.

The production and marketing of these specialty crops, agricultural experiences or entertainment is often called "alternative agriculture." There are several popular buzz words associated with these establishments including sustainable agriculture, small farms, agri-tourism, value added and specialty crop production. Essentially it means doing something that is agriculturally related, but is different from the usual agricultural activities in a county or region.

During a recent six month professional development leave, I was able to travel and study over 100 of these unique agricultural establishments. The study tour included operations in 14 eastern states and two Canadian provinces. The businesses studied included:

- Agri-tourism and entertainment
- Value added products
- Internet plant and fruit sales
- Cut flowers
- Roadside produce markets
- Direct farm sales of fruits and vegetables
- Farmers' markets
- Specialty nurseries
- U-pick sales
- Organic produce
- Hydroponic production of vegetables and cut flowers
- Compost production and marketing
- Community supported agriculture
- Wineries

At the end of the tour it was obvious that the most successful agricultural establishments exhibited similar characteristics or have some things in common:

- They establish and maintain the business from the customers' perspective, responding to their desires and



needs. In other words, they have the ability to think like the general public, not strictly like farmers.

- They are all good to excellent marketers, even if not always the best producers.
- They provide a product, experience or service that is unique or needed.
- They set goals and stick to them, yet are able to adapt to changing conditions.
- They are good people and money managers
- They network, cooperate and collaborate with customer groups, agricultural organizations and even competitors.



Some are visionary – they see their goals clearly and most of the steps necessary to accomplish them. Some producers of conventional crops are already beginning to diversify by transitioning to these alternative enterprises, while people new to agriculture are also entering the business. Whether an experienced agriculturist or not, it is very important that serious “homework” be done prior to making a monetary investment.

These alternative crops or experiences which offer high potential profit per acre generally require a higher dollar per acre investment, more intensive cultural practices and more hand labor when compared to conventional agronomic and livestock based agriculture. In most cases there will not be an organized, ready market for the products of a particular alternative enterprise. Since

marketing is the key to success, it is important that well organized plans for marketing be made prior to beginning the operation.

Fortunately, there are several good sources of information related to alternative agriculture. Perhaps the best is the IFAS Small Farms website at <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>. This site contains a wealth of information, consisting of selected resources that Florida Extension Agents, specialists and researchers have developed for small farms and alternative agriculture. The Virtual Field Day is also a feature of this web site. It allows visitors to see new crops and enterprises featured at field days and workshops. The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Network (ATTRA) at <http://www.attra.org/> should also be on your list of favorite web sites for obtaining alternative crop information. It contains the latest in sustainable agriculture and organic farming news, events and funding opportunities. In-depth publications on production practices and innovative marketing techniques are also available.



Watch for local field days, workshops and seminars related to alternative crop production. These are being provided on a more consistent basis in response to increasing interest in this subject. Specialty crop vegetable information will be provided in the Panhandle during early summer of 2009. The Twilight Specialty Crops Field Day will be offered in late June at the West Florida Research and Education Center and will feature new vegetable varieties grown in the field, shade house and greenhouse. The location, date, time and other information, when finalized, will be provided on the IFAS Small Farms and the Santa Rosa County Extension web sites or, contact me directly for the latest information.

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