

# Alternative Crops And Diversification Keys To Farm Profits

**PINE BLUFF, ARK.** Farmers can combat the tightening farm profit squeeze brought on by the current unstable global economy through diversification with alternative crops, says Dr. Obadiah Njue, Extension horticulture specialist with the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Cooperative Extension Program.

Just as diversification seems to be the key to softening economic losses in other sectors, diversifying farm enterprises can soften the impact of economic risk, offset commodity price swings, exploit profitable niche markets, improve local economy and strengthen rural communities, says Dr. Njue.

Consumer concerns with food safety strengthens the interest in locally grown produce. Alternative crops are also environmentally friendly as they break up insect pests, weed and disease cycles; supplement soil nutrients; improve soil structure; conserve soil moisture and curb soil erosion.

But, unlike conventional grain producers who use a relatively straightforward route of taking a harvested crop to the local grain elevator, alternative crop growers cannot expect a convenient marketing outlet. Instead, Dr. Njue advises they do the following:

- Research the market before planting.
- Understand the cultural practices of the crops selected.

- Develop a marketing plan with information on prices, delivery points and sales contacts.
- Establish relationships with potential buyers and understand their guidelines.
- Understand the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP).
- Understand Food Safety Guidelines.

Consider alternative crops that will be a good fit for your farm in terms of soil type, climate, labor, marketing skills and proximity to markets. Remember, diversity is the key to success of a small farm, says Dr. Njue. Grow for a diverse market and grow crops whose sales complement each other, especially when targeting local markets. Local markets include farmers' markets, farm stands and pick-your-own operations.

Alternative crops include blackberries, muscadines, persimmons, blueberries, strawberries, melon, tomatoes, peas, sweet potatoes and all types of organically grown vegetables. Other popular alternative crops are all kinds of peppers – purple, red, orange and hot; cole crops such as collards, kale, broccoli, Brussels sprouts; salad greens; and herbs.

Just as small farm diversification can be helped by embracing technology, changes in consumer demand, government policy and development of irrigation, roads and other infrastructure, it can also be hindered by risks in markets and prices, crop management practices and natural phenomena, says Dr. Njue. Δ



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