U.S. Southern

You too, have a niche in the locally grown market

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In many places across the South, multiple generations of a producer family may long have raised extensive acreage of soybeans and corn. In addition to a vegetable garden, a row of tomatoes or patch of pecan trees often was tended near the family dwelling. These personal-use plantings will be there this year too, all across the South. However, in many areas, expansions of such plots are now being considered for possible use as economic mainstays for traditional producers and for new “sustainable” production units. These are the newest components of the American fresh produce system.

These fresh fruit and fresh produce enterprises are becoming the total enterprise for a new generation of southerners, many of whom are relatively new to agricultural enterprises. A common core of reasons seems to be driving this change from field crops to other crops. Among other reasons, the impetus to grow these new crops might spring from a desire to fill a perceived demand for locally produced fresh fruits and vegetables. Maybe last year’s venture into “community supported agriculture” proved profitable or very personally satisfying, and the grower wants to expand.

In very recent years, a driver for some who have not been traditional agronomists is hope that a fresh produce enterprise may replace a vanished “day job.” “Think how much I could make with a quarter acre” is a logical extrapolation for one who last year sold fruit from a dozen tomato plants at a roadside stand and experienced strong demand.

Local newspaper stories about “alternative agriculture” systems inspire new growers, too. Typical of such stories is one entitled “Study Shows Value of Buying Local,” in which more than half of customer dollars were shown to stay in the local community. The same article emphasized strong local demand for locally produced cut flowers, another emerging market (Campbell, 2013).

If your consulting work has earned you a good reputation and the trust of an experienced traditional client base, it is almost certain that someone will ask you for advice on growing fruit and vegetables this year. It is possible you may know as much about watermelon production as you do soybean production. Whether you do or not, you should realize different markets are sought for different crops and that market structures for fresh produce are very different from what you may be used to for row crops.

Also consider that what seems to be a request for technical advice may be a marketing inquiry in disguise. Because there is a relatively new national food safety system in place, you might also consider that you really are being asked how to grow a crop that can be sold in this new food safety system.

Expand your business and provide a service

Of course, you can learn fruit and vegetable production, but remember, in many southern states, there are specialized Cooperative Extension agents for EACH crop.