

Fruit and Vegetable Production Education Helps to Meet Local Demand

The Situation

The demand for locally produced fresh produce continues to grow in Kansas, and there are not enough fruit and vegetable farmers to meet that demand. There is a great need for technical expertise and education among aspiring, new, and existing fruit and vegetable producers. Many small-acreage produce growers are first-generation farmers with limited resources. A 2017 Kansas Department of Agriculture survey, showed that 80% of farms that grow specialty crops are under 6 acres in size, and only 11% exceed 20 acres. Data from the ARMS survey analyzed by Jablonski et. al. (2018) shows that profitability increases with scale, and risk decreases with scale. So, given this information, our specialty crop farms are high risk, low profit, and yet there is an unmet demand for local food. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased demand for locally grown fruits and vegetables both from commercial sources and home gardens.

What We Did

Kansas horticulture agents, especially in Douglas, Johnson, Sedgwick and Shawnee counties partnered with Extension specialists and outside agencies to provide training for fruit and vegetable producers on topics relating to production practices, food safety, and risk management. Additionally agents adapted to provide online webinar education opportunities for food producers, both commercial and home gardeners, as face-to-face programming was limited due to the pandemic.

Programs included:

- Growing Growers KC workshops in the Kansas City metro area, in partnership with MU, Lincoln Extension, and Cultivate KC and Growing Growers ICT workshops in the Wichita metro area. One online workshop brought the two groups together.
- Regional farmers' market workshops in partnership with the Kansas Department of Agriculture
- Organizational support for the Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association leading to over \$60,000 in successful grant funding.
- Specialty crop business management training for farmers
- FSMA Produce Safety Grower Trainings & GAPs Trainings
- Online gardening workshops to help backyard growers produce more vegetables, fruit and herbs

Outcomes

All the workshops that recorded evaluations reported an increase in knowledge of the gardeners and producers. One powerful example is the Shawnee County webinar series on vegetable, fruit and herb gardening, where 95.44% of participants rated their overall learning experience in these webinars as either "excellent" or "good." In a statewide online workshop on fall vegetable production, the average participant rated that they went from having a low level of knowledge about the subject to having a high level of knowledge. In Johnson County, farmer stakeholders reported higher yields, quality, improved production systems and sustainable profits due to agent programs and intervention.

Success Story

The rapid development and presentation of online vegetable, fruit and herb gardening series in Sedgwick, Douglas and Shawnee counties reached over 1,000 participants in the spring to provide basic education on growing food crops. These workshops provided critical information at a time when face-to-face interactions were limited or prohibited and interest in gardening and fresh food availability was heightened due to the pandemic. Additionally KSU Horticulture Program Focus Team members presented at the K-State Garden Hour, with those online presentations on food production in gardens reaching over 1,200 viewers.

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