



SPECIALTY CROPS

Many different types of specialty crops are grown in Kansas, and the industry has received increased focus over the past few years to learn more about the various crops within this category. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines specialty crops as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture). Kansas also includes grapes and other specialty crops which don't fit under the USDA definition but do contribute to the Kansas economy. Specialty crops offer a variety of advantages, including small acreage requirements, and many communities see the production of fresh fruits and vegetables as a benefit provided by this industry.

To realize the potential of the specialty crop market, several challenges must be faced that could otherwise serve as a barrier to growth. Small-scale operations face difficulties overcoming problems with distribution, marketing, growing conditions and labor-intensive harvest methods. The small scale and lack of widespread producers of most of these crops makes it hard to identify and understand the crop production currently in existence. A better understanding of the crops



that are currently grown would help expand and promote the market. The state of Kansas does not belong to any organized specialty crop association — though some producers do participate in local and regional organizations — making advocacy, education and marketing a continued challenge.

The specialty crop industry offers opportunities for growth, but a successful long-term growth strategy will require input and discussion from key partners. A survey conducted in 2016 by the Kansas Department of Agriculture and K-State Research and Extension provided more information about the current producers and crops in order to better serve them. Increased involvement in the regional and national specialty crop industries will help Kansas identify ways to expand the specialty crop sector.

Collaborative efforts from all stakeholders, both public and private, are critical to the success of a strategic growth plan for the specialty crop sector in Kansas.

STATUS

The specialty crop industry in Kansas has garnered increased attention over the past few years. It is a known fact that Kansas contains pockets of specialty crop producers; however, it is not known exactly what types of specialty crops are grown and how these products are merchandised.

The U. S. Department of Agriculture defines specialty crops as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture and nursery crops (including floriculture). As reported by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, Kansas harvested with 7,800 acres of dry, edible beans in 2015, 4,100 acres of summer potatoes in 2017 and 3,400 acres of summer potatoes in 2018. Kansas is ranked 5th in the country in summer potato production. No other specialty crops meet minimal quantities for ranking.

The 2006 Kansas Horticultural Survey coordinated by the Kansas Department of Agriculture in cooperation with NASS indicated the horticulture industry added over \$1 billion in sales and expenditures to the Kansas economy during the year. Additionally, more than 780,000 acres in Kansas were involved in horticulture activities. For survey purposes, sectors included were fruit, berries, nuts, vegetables and melons, grapes and wine, medicinal plants, Christmas trees, sod, nurseries and greenhouses, florists, arborists, turf installation and maintenance, and lawn care firms. Not all of these sectors are specialty crop sectors by USDA definition; however, they have a positive economic impact to Kansas.

Interest in specialty crops is viewed from a variety of angles. One view is that specialty crop production generally requires minimal acreage and low initial investment — thus a potential avenue to attract new and beginning farmers. Other groups may see the specialty crops industry as a service to the region providing fresh fruits and vegetables during specific growing seasons in food deserts and other areas across the state.

Use of high tunnels and indoor systems helps producers grow in Kansas despite the Midwest growing climate. In order to encourage specialty crop production, steps must be taken to identify end markets interested in consistently purchasing these crops. This statement is true for all specialty crops.

OPPORTUNITIES

In order to develop a strategic growth plan for the specialty crop sector, it is important to understand the areas where Kansas has a comparative advantage and the best opportunities for growth or expansion.

Factor	Implications for Growth and Development Opportunities
Industry Association	The Kansas Vegetable Growers Association has traditionally been the organized industry association for producers. At this time there is no known large-scale or umbrella industry association for large-scale specialty crop producers in the state. Subcultures that currently exist are farmers' markets, local level farm and food councils, and small crop-specific organizations such as the Kansas Christmas Tree Growers Association.

Factor	Implications for Growth and Development Opportunities
Industry Development	Identifying current specialty crop producers, acreage and locations across the state is a key to understanding what specialty crop production exists in Kansas. In July 2016, KDA agriculture marketing distributed a statewide specialty crop survey. Specialty crop survey responses aided in identifying producers, types of specialty crops grown, and grower regions across the state.
New Products	Historically, edible beans, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, watermelons, muskmelons and ethnic crops have all grown successfully in the Kansas climate. Large-scale onion and potato farms exist in the central and western regions of the state. As direct to consumer marketing becomes prevalent in population-dense areas, less shelf-stable crops are grown more readily such as berries, vegetables, greens and apples.

CHALLENGES

Specialty crop producers face challenges to business development and potential industry growth.

Challenge	Details of Challenge
Available Education and Support	There is limited land-grant university knowledge and research. Although specialty crop extension resources are located in the eastern part of the state, the need exists for more public education on specialty crop production in the central and western parts of Kansas, due to the limited extension personnel and educational programming in these regions. Additionally, Cloud County Community College added the institution's first commercial horticulture class in fall 2016.
Critical Infrastructure	There is a lack of published information regarding specialty crop transport across the state. Some of the known "bulk" growers or aggregation points are shipping commodities out of the state.
Environment	Growing conditions and distribution logistics including cold storage of growing fruits and vegetables year-round are noted producer challenges.
Industry Association & Perception	Kansas does not have an organized specialty crop association. Thus advocacy, education and marketing of this sector attracts very limited attention. Additionally, overall attitudes within the agriculture industry may be divided with some believing a growth in the specialty crop industry may have a negative effect on traditionally grown row crop acreage. In 2018, K-State Research and Extension and several producers were awarded a Specialty Crop Block Grant to aid in organizing a Kansas specialty crop association.

Challenge	Details of Challenge
Water	No research has been done in Kansas to understand the water use requirements for specialty crops on a large scale. Additionally, understanding how much water a crop takes depends on how many growing rotations are harvested on an annual basis.
Workforce Development	At this time most specialty crops require labor-intensive harvesting methods. As technology evolves, mechanized harvesting will become available to producers. However, this mechanized method is very expensive. Thus it is not feasible for smaller and midsized growers that still require extra employees.

SUCCESSSES

Key successes in the specialty crop industry:

- A survey was conducted to investigate the economic impact of specialty crop growers in Kansas and their effect on the local food systems, to provide knowledge of the scope and needs of producers.
- Efforts have expanded to use existing partnerships to offer educational programs and develop curriculum.
 - K-State Research & Extension food safety staff provided produce safety and FSMA workshops for farmers across the state.
 - KSRE is reaching out to food councils to notify them about changing FSMA rules and available FSMA education opportunities.
 - KSRE conducted specialty crop bus tours to showcase successful specialty crop farms and specific growing practices.
 - Kansas Rural Center hosted regional specialty crop workshops in 2018 to provide education on season extension and discuss challenges in the industry.
 - KDA received a grant to provide financial support for specialty crop growers to attend the Great Lakes Expo.
- KSRE hired new staff to specifically assist with GAP certification and audits.
 - Work is underway to provide clarity and education to specialty crop brokers and farmers especially in relation to the produce safety rule (GAP certification, GAP harmonized certification, the qualified exemptions).
- A group of research and industry partners applied for and received a FY18 SCBG to start a specialty crop growers association.
- The Growing Growers program in Lawrence was established as a mentoring program for new specialty crop growers.

Specialty Crops

GROWTH OBJECTIVE:

Develop partnerships and resources that will grow the Kansas specialty crop industry, defined by USDA as “fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture).”



OUTCOMES & ACTION ITEMS

Leaders from throughout the Kansas specialty crop industry will continue to collaborate in the development and implementation of a long-term strategic growth strategy with input and discussion among key partners. Industry-identified desired growth outcomes, initially developed in 2016 and expanded to include action items, will be implemented by industry and key partners and updated annually at the Kansas Governor’s Summit on Agricultural Growth. Following are the proposed action items to continue building on the achievement of the specialty crop sector desired outcomes.

High Priority Outcomes

Completion of a survey process to provide broad baseline knowledge of the specialty crop industry, including the scope and needs of producers and the specific crops that are grown and harvested.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Develop a survey instrument, then publicize and collect survey responses from the horticulture industry at large.
- Utilize responses to provide support personnel (primarily K-State Research and Extension) with a summary of resources needed for established growers as well as potential growers who are interested in becoming a specialty crop producer.
- Utilize responses to create a specialty crop marketing campaign to educate consumers of the options available to them for Kansas-grown specialty crops, including information about how they can best support Kansas specialty crop farmers and purchase Kansas specialty crop products. This should include recognition of farmer-to-consumer direct marketing, farmers’ market recognition, community-supported agriculture programs, roadside stands, and agritourism to raise consumer awareness of crops and seasonality of crop availability.

Additional K-State Research and Extension specialists and increased specialty crop/horticulture research and research plot placement throughout the state.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Add KSRE specialists with an emphasis on specialty crop and horticulture production.
- Increase specialty crop research including research plot placement throughout the state.
- Identify and utilize other specialists in Kansas such as current specialty crop producers to create a network of specialists to turn to with questions.
- Increase of educational resources and KSRE literature available for specialty crop growers.

Development of Kansas specialty crop network to support mid- to large-scale food processors, including an expanded distribution network targeted for Tier 2 marketing outlets.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Identify the markets available and steps to prepare to enter larger markets.
- Provide education to growers for other markets beyond farmers' markets (provided by extension, KDA or larger growers in mentorship roles).
- Survey current Kansas food processing license holders and inventory types of specialty crops purchased and processed, including volume and Tier 2 marketing.
- Seek input from specialty crop brokers regarding opportunities and challenges for sourcing Kansas specialty crops to fulfill Tier 2 purchasing needs.
- Identify gaps in supply and demand and research options for aggregation and distribution facilities, growing season extension, and processing options.

The formation of a Specialty Crop Growers Association providing industry support and connections to its members.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Create a common definition of the crops that are included as specialty crops (i.e., fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, possibly honey? livestock feed? what else?).
- Work for coordination and cohesiveness between existing organizations such as the Kansas Fruit Growers Association, Kansas Vegetable Growers Association, Kansas Grape Growers Association, and other specialty crop groups.
- Launch opportunity for members to join in 2019.
- Host regional meetings to connect with producers across the state.
- Provide a database of growers and of resources for specialty crop growers.
- The Specialty Crop Growers Association will provide a unified voice to speak for the specialty crop industry and work towards growth in all other action items in the specialty crop sector.

Medium Priority Outcomes

Feasibility study to determine the impact and proper alignment of food hubs as a part of the specialty crop industry in Kansas.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Evaluate existing food hubs in the state and surrounding region to determine best methods and learning models.
- Complete a feasibility study to determine the impact and proper alignment of food hubs as a part of the specialty crop industry in Kansas.
- Review and publish the findings to increase knowledge regarding food hubs and their methodology.

Increased revenue for educational programs, promotion and outreach at the state and local level about current specialty crop practices and industry opportunities for the purpose of business development and economic growth to support and recruit growth to the industry.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Develop a promotional campaign educating Kansans about new and beginning specialty crop farmer programs, Kansas food safety/produce safety regulations, and educational resources located throughout the state.
- Develop inventory lists promoting the specialty crop industry and marketing outlets across the state. (e.g., harvesting equipment partnerships, registered farmers' markets, produce auctions, buyer networks, or direct to retailer relationships).
- Educate and promote Kansans and beginning specialty crop farmers by demonstrating specialty crop success and economic viability of this farming option.
- Encourage producer participation in trade organizations and industry and educational events as a cohesive effort of different agencies working together.
- Engage Kansas agriculture education programs and encourage both rural and urban agriculture programs to consider specialty crops as a supervised agriculture experience and ultimately as a career.
- Use existing food councils and community events to work with local-level extension specialists and economic development representatives to offer education programs and develop curriculum about specialty crop production.
- Replicate the Growing Growers program in other areas of Kansas.
- Provide education on crucial business aspects such as funding options and insurance and liability needs.

Low Priority Outcomes

Identification of temporary, seasonal and alternative workforce needs for Kansas specialty crop producers in relation to general workforce needs of the state.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Evaluate the needs of the industry in relation to general workforce needs of the state.
- Work with Kansas specialty crop producers to ensure that their temporary, seasonal, and alternative workforce needs are met.
- Replicate the Growing Growers program in other areas of Kansas.
- Work with youth and high school business, entrepreneurship, and agriculture students to create a workforce pool for seasonal workers, interns, and those looking for summer jobs or supervised agriculture experience programs.

Policies in this document are a reflection of industry discussion and not a representation of state government.

