



# SPECIALTY CROPS

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines specialty crops as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture). In Kansas, farmers grow over 70 different types of specialty crops and see value in producing healthy and culturally relevant food for their communities while contributing to their local economies. The specialty crop industry has received attention over the past few years with the increased demand in locally sourced food due to supply chain disruptions. Additionally, more and more Kansas schools, grocery stores, and retail outlets are looking to source products from local specialty crop growers.

To realize the potential of the specialty crop industry several challenges must be faced that are seen as barriers to growth. Kansas specialty crop growers face difficulties with growing conditions, labor-intensive harvest methods, marketing, and distribution. There is also lack of education and support available to specialty crop growers within the state and the sector is often overshadowed by dominance of traditional farming. The small scale of specialty crop farms and large variety of specialty crops grown in small volumes makes it hard to

identify and understand the crop production currently in existence in the state. A better understanding of the crops grown, harvested, and distributed would help expand and promote the sector.

A survey conducted by the Kansas Department of Agriculture and K-State Research and Extension gathered baseline data to help better identify the specialty crops grown in Kansas and understand the needs of our growers. As a result of the survey findings, the Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association was formed to represent the state's growers and advocate for the industry.

The forward movement of the specialty crop industry is exciting and there are many opportunities for growth. However, coordination is needed and a successful long-term growth strategy will require input and discussion from key partners.

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 continues to grow and has garnered increased attention over the past few years. There are around 100 identified producers who are paid members of the Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association. Kansas contains pockets of specialty crop producers, but growth indicates a trend that specialty crop production is spreading across all areas of the state. Moreover, the KSCGA is working to identify what types of specialty crops are grown and how they can be merchandised.

According to a Kansas Department of Agriculture IMPLAN economic model, the estimated direct impact of vegetable and melon farming, fruit farming, tree nut farming and greenhouse, nursery, and floriculture production sectors is \$111.8 million in output and 657 jobs. Including indirect and induced effects, the total impact of these sectors on the Kansas economy reaches \$181.3 million in output and 1,006 jobs. An additional model shows the impact of the wineries sector on the Kansas economy. That sector has a direct output of \$37.5 million and accounts for 138 jobs. In total, the wineries sector contributes \$57.2 million in output and 226 jobs.

Kansas specialty crop growers continue to evolve in terms of production, expertise, and direction. Specialty crop production generally requires minimal acreage and low initial investment and has become attractive to new and beginning farmers. Specialty crop growers can run profitable businesses by selling to consumers, food aggregators, or wholesale to retail outlets. Specialty crop growers can also serve as contract growers for large marketers to supply local specialty crops for widespread distribution.

Specialty crops utilize a variety of growing environments. The use of high tunnels and indoor systems helps producers grow year-round 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, regardless of how they are grown.

## Status

- The KSCGA continues to increase capacity and reach to enhance networking and awareness among Kansas growers. The association was able to hire a part-time project manager to help advance these efforts and membership and engagement continue to be at a level greater than projected. The KSCGA Facebook group averages over 250 members actively engaged in sharing opportunities in grants, loss compensation, equipment and infrastructure sales and distribution, collective purchasing, new crops, cultivation practices and more. The KSCGA quarterly newsletter distribution list contains over 400 growers and friends of the industry and sees a good rate of engagement (>50%).
- The KSCGA received funding from the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops to develop and implement a now functional data management platform. The platform was uniquely designed for the association and allows for effective management and reporting on Kansas specialty crops. The system currently holds information on crops, sales and marketing platforms, vision, and needs of over 130 Kansas growers.
- To build organizational capacity in effective networking to meet the needs of growers, the KSCGA received a Kansas Specialty Crop Block Grant to develop, trial, and roll out a Kansas growers online networking platform and directory where growers can seek and find information, archive materials, and connect with other growers in building collective production and distribution scales. Recent projects have focused on increasing access to, knowledge of, and consumption of specialty crops as well as food safety training, specialty crop education, and marketing skills for specialty crop growers.
- The Kansas Rural Center received a USDA-AMS Local Food Promotion Program grant to create a food hub and delivery network to serve communities along I-35 in Kansas and increase food access.