



# 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. Additionally, more and more Kansas schools, grocery stores, and retail outlets are looking to local specialty crop farmers for their produce.

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 grown, cultivated and distributed would help expand and promote the market. The 2016 survey conducted by the Kansas Department of Agriculture and K-State Research and Extension gathered data to provide more information about the current producers and crops and how better to assist growers. Consequently, in January 2019 the Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association (KSCGA) was formed to help address specialty crop issues and opportunities. Although the state of Kansas still does not belong to any national organized specialty crop association, this association has helped address the challenge of advocacy, education and marketing.

The specialty crop industry offers opportunities for growth, but a successful long-term growth strategy will require input and discussion from key partners. Increased involvement in the regional and national specialty crop industry 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 continues to grow and has garnered increased attention over the past few years. There are now well over 200 identified producers that are part of the Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association. It is a known fact that Kansas contains pockets of specialty crop producers, but the growth indicates a trend that is spreading across all areas of Kansas. Moreover, the KSCGA is working to identify what types of specialty crops are grown and how these can be 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 8,200 acres of dry, edible beans in 2018, 4,100 acres of summer potatoes in 2017 and 3,300 acres of summer potatoes in 2018. Kansas is ranked 5th in the country in summer potato production. Currently, no other specialty crops meet minimal quantities for ranking.

According to a Kansas Department of Agriculture IMPLAN economic model, the estimated direct impact of the vegetable and melon farming, fruit farming, tree nut farming and greenhouse, nursery, and floriculture production sectors is \$108.4 million in output and 714 jobs. Including indirect and induced effects, the total impact of the sector on the Kansas economy reaches \$180.3 million in output and 1,139 jobs.

An additional model shows the impact of the wineries sector on the Kansas economy. The sector has a direct output of \$44.3 million and accounts for 136 jobs. In total, the sector contributes \$64.5 million in output and 236 jobs.

Specialty crop producers continue to evolve in terms of production, expertise and direction. Therefore, several views help define specialty crop businesses. 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. Another view is that the specialty crop industry is a service, for profit, to the state providing fresh fruits and vegetables during specific growing seasons in parts of the state. A more recent view is that the specialty crop producer is another avenue for large marketers to obtain local specialty crops for local and regional marketing. Yet another recent view is that specialty crop producers are treating specialty crops as profitable business ventures — another model for farming.

Specialty crops utilize a variety of growing environments. The 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
<b>Industry Association</b>	<p>The Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association was created from the Kansas Vegetable Growers Association and is focused on creating a network of growers equipped with the resources, education and mentoring necessary to increase production and profitability.</p> <p>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, food "hubs," and direct producer to local and regional large-scale marketers.</p>

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

Factor	Implications for Growth and Development Opportunities
<b>Industry Development</b>	Identifying current specialty crop producers, acreage and locations across the state is a key to understanding what specialty crop production exists in Kansas. During 2019, a new KSCGA website was created and databases identifying current specialty crop producers, their locations, and technical support personnel were produced to help build awareness and networking linkages for growers. Additional work is being done to identify crop locations and further technical support.
<b>New Products</b>	Historically, edible beans, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, watermelons, muskmelons and ethnic crops have all grown successfully in the Kansas climate. Recently, less stable crops such as berries, vegetables, greens, strawberries, fruits and even baker's wheat have become more prevalent. And in 2019, some specialty crop growers began investigating hemp farming. As more specialty crop producers become identified, more new products will also be identified that in the past might not have been labeled specialty crops.

## CHALLENGES

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

Challenge	Details of Challenge
<b>Available Education and Support</b>	While Kansas State University, the state's land grant institution, has become more active in both research and education in specialty crops, as the specialty crop industry matures so will the need for education. K-State has added a master's program in urban food systems which includes specialty crops, Cloud County Community College has added a commercial horticulture class, and K-State Research and Extension has provided numerous seminars. Grants to help educate producers on food safety have been funded. However, specialists providing technical support for specialty crops remain an issue. Speakers with expertise in actual specialty crop farming are regularly requested; many times, they come from locations outside Kansas. Finding educators trained in specialty crop production to teach in high school vocational agriculture is a new but welcome challenge.
<b>Environment</b>	Weather conditions continue to impact production across the state. Drought has continued across much of the state, but gave way to excessive rainfall and flooding in some regions in the spring of 2022. Wind events occurred throughout 2021-2022, resulting in infrastructure damage for many growers. KSCGA worked with KDA to assess and assist in high-tunnel damage. Flooding and wet soil conditions affected outdoor planting and decreased yields and season length for early produce, particularly fruits.
<b>Industry Association &amp; Perception</b>	In 2018, K-State Research and Extension and several producers were awarded a Specialty Crop Block Grant to organize a Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association. While a website, a grower database, and a technical assistance database have been created, the formal governance and direction of the organization remains a challenge. Even with the creation of the new association, this sector attracts very limited attention and advocacy, education, and marketing of this sector remain a challenge. Additionally, overall attitudes within the agricultural and supporting industries may be divided as to the importance of the specialty crop industry. A challenge remains to educate other industries that specialty crop farming is another model for farming that can be either part of or even independent of the traditional farming environment.

Challenge	Details of Challenge
<b>Critical Infrastructure</b>	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 state. Coordination of growers with transportation to markets outside of their marketing areas continues to be a challenge.
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Tools, the machinery to prepare and harvest, and the mechanical means to produce specialty crops do present challenges. The cost to raise specialty crops with the needed mechanical devices can be high. As technology evolves, mechanized farming will become available to producers. However, this mechanized method can be expensive, especially for the small to midsized grower.
<b>Support</b>	Increasingly, producers who are raising specialty crops are businesses. As such, business plans, lending opportunities, obtaining insurance for health, liability, and structures is a challenge. Taxes and all of those ramifications remain a challenge for specialty crop growers.
<b>Workforce Development</b>	<p>The labor shortage seen in rural areas for years has been worsened by recent changes in labor markets throughout our economy and society. Growers have needed to increase wages and often make do while they are short-handed in production, processing, agritourism, and other arenas in hopes the labor market will stabilize.</p> <p>Increased costs of inputs, fuel, equipment, and infrastructure development have impacted all sectors of our economy. With these supply costs associated with national and global issues, interim remedies may need to be focused on fiscal support mechanisms for Kansas growers at the state level.</p>

## SUCCESSSES

Key successes in the specialty crop industry:

- As COVID-19 changed how people shop for food and increased awareness and demand in regional food systems, growers are exploring opportunities to expand individually and collectively. Many Kansas specialty crop growers report continued increased demand and expanded production and sales in dynamic distribution systems.
- Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association (KSCGA) continues to increase capacity and reach to enhance networking and awareness among Kansas growers. With USDA SCBG grant and other funding, the 0.5-time contracted KSCGA Project Manager position is secure for the next 12-15 months. Membership and engagement continue to be at a level greater than that projected in original grant objectives. KSCGA membership (paid) increased by 333%.
- Active engagement in its private Facebook Group averaging 220 individual growers and invested parties each month sharing information and ideas: with frequent engagement among growers in sharing opportunities in funding/grants/loss compensation, equipment and infrastructure sales and distribution, collective purchasing, new crops and cultivation practices, and more.
- Quarterly newsletters created and distributed through the past year, with greatly expanded and diversified content.
- KSCGA hosted the first in a series of production and sales-oriented workshops and tours done in collaboration with Kansas Farmers Union. The series is focusing on planning around food safety in growers’ evolution in production and sales. KSCGA will build on this initial offering with timely workshops and tours focusing on connecting with sales and distribution networks, cultivation practices, and other topics.
- Funding from the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops was secured to develop and implement a now functional data management platform. Working with WaterGrass, a nonprofit-oriented developer, a platform uniquely designed for the organization allows for effective management and reporting on Kansas specialty crops. The system currently holds information on crops, sales and marketing platforms, vision, and needs on over 130 Kansas growers.
- To build organizational capacity in effective networking to meet the needs of growers, KSCGA has been awarded 2021 USDA SCBG HR133 Stimulus grant funding 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.

## 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

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

#### ACTION ITEMS:

- Hire more specialists and support staff to assist at:
  - Olathe Horticulture Research and Extension Center
  - Research center near Wichita
  - Student farm in Manhattan
  - Extension locations across the state
- Engage the following stakeholders about support and specialist needs:
  - Community colleges, in particular Highland Community College, which has a research vineyard center in Wamego
  - Kansas Legislature
  - K-State Research and Extension administration
  - K-State — appropriate units
  - KSCGA producer members
- Develop partnerships with K-State, producers, vendors, elementary and secondary schools.
- Increase focus on Western Kansas and other areas.
- Increase interactions with KDA.
- Obtain additional specialty crop block grant funding for more specialty crop support and research.
- Update the economic impact study of the specialty crop industry for Kansas.

**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:

- Work with Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association to develop a crop network for all KSCGA members.
- Discuss and submit grant(s) to investigate:
  - Farm-to-market opportunities
  - Under what conditions do commercial kitchens make sense 0 Food contracts with large-scale buyers for producers
  - Branding
  - Cross-state possibilities for collaboration in all areas of specialty crop farming
- Provide means for planning and education to growers for other markets beyond farmers’ markets.
- Work with KSCGA to develop a crop insurance network for all KSCGA members.

**Increased funding 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:**

- Look into options of virtual educational program about specialty crop practices.
- Apply for Bayer \$25,000 grant — greenhouses at schools.
- Apply for KDA/USDA grants.
- Apply for Kansas Department of Commerce grants.
- Investigate K-12 and two-year pathways/programs.
- Continue to work with local food co-ops.
- K-State Research and Extension pathway.
- Identify zones of production (soil, climate, water).
- Training for growers on grant seeking and grant writing.
- Finding partners for the industry to work with and for specialty crop producers to collaborate with.
- Build a culture of what it means to be part of the KSCGA.
- Replicate the Growing Growers program in other areas of the state.
- Provide education on crucial aspects such as funding options and insurance and liability needs.
- Engage Kansas agriculture education programs and encourage both rural and urban high school/middle school agriculture programs to consider specialty crops as a supervised agriculture experience and ultimately as a career.
- Develop a promotional campaign educating Kansans about new and beginning specialty crop farmer programs.
- Educate and promote Kansans and beginning specialty crop farmers by demonstrating specialty crop success

---

## **Medium 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 & 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' markets, community-supported agriculture programs, roadside stands, and agritourism to raise consumer awareness of crops and seasonality of crop availability.

**Industry support and connections for members of the Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association.**

**ACTION ITEMS:**

- Obtain technical support assistance.
- Seek additional cooperation from growers for KSCGA activities.
- Develop a network with specialty crop industries and get them involved.
- Increase awareness across the state via traveling and/or regional seminars/field trips.
- Reach out to other Kansas growers' organizations such as Kansas Grape Growers Assoc., Kansas Fruit Growers Assoc., etc.
- Update the definition of the crops that are included as specialty crops.
- Provide a unified voice for the specialty crop industry.

---

## **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 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.