This newsletter is intended for people interested in commercial fruit and vegetable production, business planning and North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service meetings throughout North Carolina. For back issues of this newsletter please go to the Jones County Extension website and click on the Commercial Horticulture, Nursery & Turf menu option on the left side of the website. The website address is: http://jones.ces.ncsu.edu

Mark Seitz
Extension Area Specialized Agent
Agriculture – Commercial Horticulture & Marketing
(252) 448-9621 or Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS, MEETINGS, TOURS

December 9, 2009. Herbicide Resistant Weed Management. 6 PM to 8 PM, Jones County Civic Center, Trenton, NC. Learn how to manage herbicide resistant weeds – mainly Palmer amaranth pigweed – and others. 1.0 hours of pesticide recertification credits applied for. Contact Jacob Morgan at the Jones County Extension office to register.

Training Opportunities for Farmers and Their Families at Lenoir Community College – Jones County Campus in 2010

Quickbooks (financial management software) training begins January 14 from 6:30 PM -9:30 PM on Thursday nights for 17 Weeks.

Community Supported Agriculture Workshop will be held Thursday, January 14, from 9 AM -12 PM

Website Development begins February 1, from 7:00 PM -9:00 PM on Monday nights for 8 weeks.

There are no tuition/book fees charged to farmers or their immediate family members to take these classes. These training opportunities are available through the Tobacco Trust Project Skill Up Grant.

Contact Renee Sutton at LCC-Jones County Campus at 252-448-5021 to pre-register for these classes.
January 11-12, 2010. 44th Annual NC Blueberry Council Annual Meeting. Sampson Agri-Expo Center, Clinton NC. The meeting begins at 8:30 AM each day, ends at noon on Wednesday, January 13, and includes a trade show, educational sessions, specialty crop pesticide recertification (category X), and optional 2-hr pesticide safety training (category V).

January 27, 2010. Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) Training. Craven County Extension Center, New Bern, NC. 1 PM – 5 PM. Microbial contamination in food is an on-going problem and at this time many consumers view large commercial processors and food brokers as the culprits. Local foods are not exempt from this problem and producers need to learn the latest in how to minimize the chance a food safety problem will occur with your product.

For directions, go to www.sampsonexpocenter.com. For more information about the meeting including registration, lunch fees, and registration deadline, contact Julie Woodcock at 910 471 3193, or by email at: ncblueberry@bellsouth.net

February 11, 2010. Regional Farmers Market Managers Food Safety Recall Training. Pitt County Extension office, Greenville, NC. This training will show participants how to handle a product recall, how to handle the media and how to deal with consumers if a food borne illness problem were to occur at a farmers market. Participation is limited to 40 people. Call Mark Seitz at (252) 448-9621 to register and for more information.


BUSINESS PLANNING

‘Tis the Season…

“Time to hike up my britches, put on my hip boots and go collect soil samples!”

How Much Should I Charge for My Produce in 2010?

Ready or not, 2010 is almost here. If you are like me you are wondering where 2009 went. A lot has changed this year and ready or not more changes are on the way.

One thing that rarely changes is the never-ending battle of trying to figure out what to charge for your fruit and vegetables each year. While there is one-size-fits-all answer, a lot of thought should go toward answering this question because every grower’s cost to grow and market the crop varies.

Consider what the current prices are on the wholesale and retail market level at the grocery stores, at nearby farmers markets or at the restaurants you sell to. This information is not always easy to get, especially in late March or early April when harvest is about to begin in eastern NC.
One source of price information available to you every day is the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Market website: http://www.agr.state.nc.us/markets/mktnews/vegetabl.htm. NCDA&CS has revamped this site, and it now offers you the latest prices at markets in North Carolina, the National FOB (freight on buyer) prices and prices at the national terminal markets in places like Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago and Miami.

This information, while not exactly local to the area, may help show price trends and give you a sense of how much of a change has occurred in produce prices from 2009 to 2010. Using the Internet to collect information like this should help you do a better job of setting your prices in 2010.

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**Marketing Idea:**

I attended the NC Strawberry Association Conference in Durham on November 9, 2009 and during one of the sessions on marketing an idea popped into my head that I thought you might be able to use with your customers in 2010.

One of the speakers discussed the annual challenge he has of keeping his farm name in front of his consumers in the winter months. He uses newsletters, websites, mass email and any other method he can think about. The comment he made that struck me was how difficult it is to tell people when the first strawberry or tomato is going to be available in the spring. Mother Nature obviously has a big role in this and making this prediction is always difficult at best.

The dilemma this farmer – and you – faced, brought to mind a marketing ploy a ski resort in Michigan used in the 1970s in conjunction with a big radio station in Detroit. For years the ski company asked radio listeners to mail them a postcard with the exact time and date that the last square inch of snow would melt off their biggest ski run in northern Michigan in the spring. They would get hundreds of thousands of cards mailed in each year from this contest. Depending on the weather that winter the date might have been early May or even June. I remember one year the snow didn’t melt off that ski trail until mid-July!

The winner of this contest got a one week trip to any of the resort company’s cruise ship, golf course or ski resorts outside Michigan.

The point of this story is that you can use this type of marketing strategy in a similar way. Use your mailing list and website to ask customers to do a similar thing. Ask your customers via mass email, or your farm website, to send a note with the date your first strawberry, tomato or cucumber will be available. In the case of strawberries you might ask them to also pick when harvest season will end.

I suspect most of you aren’t going to be giving away cruises, but prizes for the contest ought to be easy to create. The prize might be 10 lbs of free strawberries, a free basket of produce or a voucher for your corn maize or some other activity on your farm. Highlight the winner on radio, TV, your website and anywhere else you can get exposure. The prize is up to you. The buzz it can create about your farm is also up to you.

From a marketing standpoint, a contest like this does a couple of things for you. 1) It is a way to expand your customer email list. 2) It can give you information about what your customers know about your farm, about the produce you grow and the months the crop is available. And 3) it can help you develop some excitement about your farm before harvest season starts, that gets people to come to the farm.
Have fun with it and let me know if you tried it and if it worked.

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**FOOD SAFETY:**

I will be hosting a Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) training at the Craven County Extension office in New Bern on Wednesday, January 27, 2010, at 9 AM. This program is available to all fruit and vegetable growers, and provides the background information you need to do one of two things, A) Learn more about food safety and things that you can do on the farm to minimize food-borne illnesses from happening and B) identify places in your operation that need to be improved to get you ready to pass a third-party GAP audit if you choose or need to have one.

Many large commercial farmers already have this certification, as GAP audits are now more than ever a buyer-driven requirement. To give you a sense of how big an issue this is becoming throughout the food industry, one of the largest vegetable canning companies in the US had more than 2,300 customer requests for GAP and food safety documents in 2008.

Large retail grocers and food brokers are requiring these inspections, to ensure the products they buy are as safe as can be and that they were grown using the best known food-safety management practices available.

Fruit and vegetable farmers - regardless of the size of the operation - should attend, to better understand what they could do to ensure the products they sell are as safe. There is no mandated program at this time and no standard building or piece of equipment to buy. The goal is to teach you what to look for on your farm to minimize microbial contamination risk.

The NCSU Food Safety Task Force has developed training materials that will be available to help both large and small growers better understand what GAP certification is all about.

If you are interested in attending this training, please register no later than Monday, January 25, 2010, by calling Mark Seitz at the Jones County Extension Center at (252) 448-9621 or email me at Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu.

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**NC Coastal Farmers Eligible for Grant Awards**

Grants totaling $750,000 over a three-year period will be awarded for farm enterprises that demonstrate innovative opportunities in production, processing and marketing. RAFI-USA’s Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund is designed to keep farmers in farming and to maintain the economic base of North Carolina’s rural communities. All farmers are eligible to apply.

Awards: The maximum amount available to individual farmers is $10,000 and $30,000 for collaborative farmer or community projects. **Grant applications for the Coastal Region are due December 16, 2009, at 5:00 p.m.**

Eligibility: Qualifying producers must be farmers or farmer “groups” actively engaged in full or part-time farming in the Coastal Region which includes the Counties of Beaufort, Bertie, Brunswick, Camden, Carteret, Chowan, Craven, Currituck, Dare, Duplin, Gates, Greene, Hertford, Hyde, Jones, Lenoir, Martin, New Hanover, North Hampton, Onslow, Pamlico, Pasquotank, Pender, Perquimans, Pitt, Tyrrell, Washington and Wayne Counties.

Priority is given to projects that provide opportunities for a new generation of farmers and to applicants who had tobacco income at
the time of the Master Settlement Agreement. Examples of past projects have included improved greenhouse vegetable production, supplies for pasture-raised livestock, expansion of nursery operations, farmer’s market assistance and more.

Questions about the program can be directed to Patricia Clark, pat@rafiusa.org, 919-545-4847. Interested farmers and representatives of agricultural cooperatives or associations may obtain applications at ncfarmgrants.org or by calling 919-542-1396 ext. 205.

CROP PRODUCTION:

Strawberry Production and Variety Update

I mentioned earlier I just attended the NC Strawberry Association conference in Durham. For anyone growing or who might be interested in growing strawberries, this is THE conference for you.

At this meeting I met for the first time Dr. Jeremy Pattison, NCSU Strawberry Plant breeder. Dr. Pattison is one of three strawberry plant breeders in the United States and we in NC and at NCSU are lucky to have him.

Dr. Pattison is working very hard to develop new strawberry varieties suited for North Carolina’s climate. He believes genetics control your productivity and profitability in the long run. To that end, he is evaluating over 14,000 selections and said that out of these, less than 1% will make it to commercial release stage.

Dr. Pattison shared some statistics about the NC strawberry industry that I thought I’d share with you.

Between 1991 and 2008…

- The value of NC’s strawberry industry grew from $7 million to $21 million
- Yields grew from 5,000 pounds per acre to 13,000 lbs per acre.
- Value per pound of strawberries in NC today averages $1.00 per pound while the value in Florida averages $1.50 per pound.
- There are some new varieties with greatly improved yield and disease resistant qualities coming out of the NCSU plant breeding program. Keep an eye out for NC0263, NCL7-7, NCL5-87 and NCL5-92. These varieties are day neutral types that have promise for extending the growing season. At this time, the immediate benefit may be with mountain growers, but these varieties are showing good characteristics that might help translate into varieties that will tolerate heat and humidity and allow growers in eastern NC to extend their market season.

Strawberry Disease Management

In light of the storm fronts that have rolled through the area in November, I contacted Dr. Frank Louws, NCSU Plant Pathology Department and Plant Disease Insect Clinic strawberry guru, about managing disease problems related to the incredibly wet conditions we are enduring. As you know some areas have received 10” to 12” of rain and that’s a lot of water standing on roots for a long time, thereby greatly increasing the risk that root disease will set in.

In light of these conditions, Dr. Louw’s recommended the following:

“In fields with a history of P. cactorum (anthracnose), an additional application of Ridomil, drip applied may be necessary with all the moisture falling in the area.”
I have seen fields in the area where P. cactorum is rearing its ugly head, so keep your eyes open. Plants affected wilt down very quickly and if severe the problem may be widely scattered across the field. A little detective work may be in order to determine if there was a problem with the plant source or if the problem came in after planting. Either way this is a devastating disease and early detection is imperative.

If you see such problems, let me know. I will be happy to come out and help collect samples to send to the Plant Disease & Insect Clinic to confirm a diagnosis.

**Schedule:** I will be out of the office from December 21 until January 4 visiting my family in Michigan. I will be checking my email: Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu so if you have questions send them to me via email. Have a happy holiday and I look forward to working with all of you in 2010.

If you have questions about any of the information, upcoming meetings, business strategies, or crop production management issues, please call me at the Jones County Extension Center at (252) 448-9621. I can also be reached by email at: Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu.