

SERA 45 Crop Diversification Opportunities to Enhance the Viability of Small Farms

**Annual Meeting
Friday, September 22nd, 2023
9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. EDT**

Participants and guests in attendance: In-person: Lesley Oliver (Administrative Advisor, University of Kentucky); J. Mike Phillips (Administrative Advisor, Auburn University); Wenjing Guan (Vice-Chair, Purdue University), Christy Cassady (University of Kentucky), Ajay Nair (Iowa State University), Mary Rogers (University of Minnesota), Emily Spencer (University of Kentucky), Melanie Stock (Utah State University), Brett Wolff (University of Kentucky), Tim Woods (University of Kentucky), Shawn Wright (University of Kentucky). Virtual: Lewis Jett (Chair, West Virginia University), Matt Kleinhenz (The Ohio State University), Petrus Langenhoven (Purdue University), Rachel Painter (Center for Profitable Agriculture, Tennessee), Rachel Rudolph (University of Kentucky), Margarita Velandia (University of Tennessee), Annette Wszelaki (University of Tennessee).

The 2023 SERA 45 annual meeting was held at the Jefferson County Farm Bureau in Louisville, KY.

Agenda

- Lewis Jett (West Virginia) facilitated the meeting, which opened with introductions.
- Participants discussed progress made toward the project objectives, crop diversification activities going on in the participating states, and opportunities for future collaboration. Written state reports were shared with the entire group by email prior to the meeting.

A. The group discussed progress made toward project objective 1 (developing research-based production information about crops, systems and production practices that have potential to be profitable for small farms).

1. Annette Wszelaki (Tennessee) gave an update on a squash hunger trials project, which was started to provide updated production and variety recommendations for crops that had not been looked at for a number of years. The project was also started to evaluate crops that could be made available to food banks later in the year. The group conducted research on kabocha squash in 2021, acorn squash in 2022, and spaghetti squash in 2023. The project is also looking at storage of the crops, and the spaghetti squash crop was lost after a month in storage. Wszelaki has a new assistant who is going through a backlog of data on the project. The group discussed other crops they might consider for the trials, including potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, and carrots.
2. Ajay Nair (Iowa) gave a PowerPoint presentation on a mesotunnel project using Protek netting conducted by Iowa State, the University of Kentucky, and Cornell University. Research has shown Protek netting to be a viable option, although the economics need to be worked out. Growers are finding multiple uses for Protek netting. Mary Rogers (Minnesota) shared that the netting works well for spotted wing drosophila. She added that Protek netting might be a better option than poly covers for high tunnels during Minnesota's hot, dry summers. Wenjing Guan (Indiana) mentioned a farmer who uses Protek netting on high

tunnels during the summer, and it works well.

B. The group discussed objective 2, coordination of research and extension activities in the participating states.

1. Melanie Stock (Utah) and Tim Woods (Kentucky) discussed their collaboration on a Kentucky Specialty Crop Block Grant (Woods, PI) “Integrating Post-Covid Cut Flower Demand into Market Education.” Stock shared a PowerPoint presentation on the Kentucky-Utah cut flower collaboration. Interest in cut flowers has grown dramatically in Kentucky and Utah in recent years. Stock said cut flower growers are active on social media, with Facebook being more popular in Kentucky and Instagram in Utah. Fact sheets are popular among growers, who still want PDFs. The collaboration resulted in a fact sheet in 2021, [Cut Flowers for Community Supported Agriculture Production](#), which has been downloaded 339 times. In 2022, UK Cooperative Extension, the UK Center for Crop Diversification (CCD), the Kentucky Horticulture Council (KHC) and Utah State offered a webinar, The Art & Science of Pricing, which drew 360 registrants. The webinar recording has been viewed 2,276 times on the CCD YouTube channel. A cut flower short course was held at the Kentucky Fruit and Vegetable Conference in Bowling Green, KY in January 2023, featuring speakers from UK, Stock, and farmers. The short course, which was organized by Cindy Finneseth of the KHC, drew approximately 90 attendees. Feedback from attendees indicated a 30 percent increase in understanding of the subject matter after attending the programming, and the overall presentation was rated very good to excellent. In addition, a majority of attendees indicated they were likely or definitely planning to use the information in their operations within the next three to six months. Recorded conference sessions, which were posted to the CCD YouTube channel, received 1,402 views across nine presentations in seven months. The most viewed recordings were the KY flower calendar, florist survey, and the top five flowers. Next steps in this collaboration include creating a survey for cut flower workshop participants to identify consumer behaviors such as willingness to recommend, cross purchasing, etc. This will help growers identify the impact a workshop could have on their business model. The grant will also involve working with a stem-pricing tool and looking for ways to integrate a pricing tool like this in the grower education series. Those at UK involved in the grant might visit Utah in 2024.
2. The group discussed an SCRI planning grant looking at root-knot nematode in watermelon production. Guan (Indiana) and Rachel Rudolph (Kentucky) are among the collaborators. Guan said root knot nematode is a major problem for melon growers in southwestern Indiana. Rudolph had already done a root knot nematode survey of high tunnel growers in Kentucky. Her survey showed more than half of the high tunnels sampled were infested with root knot nematode. Guan and Rudolph are building a team and writing a proposal.
3. Christy Cassady (Kentucky), Rachel Painter (Tennessee), and Lewis Jett (West Virginia) discussed their collaboration on a regional elderberry crop profile earlier this year. The result was a new regional publication, [Commercial Production of Elderberry](#), which built upon the CCD’s existing crop profile on elderberry. The new publication grew out of increased interest throughout the region in this crop.

C. The group discussed Objective 3, developing direct market information and decision aids that can be shared regionally.

1. Cassady (Kentucky) shared that the UK CCD is regularly reporting prices from five produce

auctions across Kentucky, including a new auction located in Trigg County. A three-year report of produce auction prices in Kentucky will be available soon. Brett Wolff (Kentucky) gave an update on farmers market price reporting in Kentucky and said that there has been a decline in the number of reporters since Covid. Wolff is working on a five-year farmers market price reporting publication. Wolff and Woods recently had an article published in Southern Ag Today, [Farmers Markets and the South](#). Margarita Velandia (Tennessee) shared that Tennessee has had five or six farmers markets reporting regularly in 2023. Velandia said that after years of seeing virtually no change in prices at Tennessee farmers markets, she has seen an increase in prices since Covid, possibly due to increases in input costs. Woods (Kentucky) noted there has been a big increase in prices at produce auctions post-Covid. Tennessee has also seen an increase in the number of vendors at farmers markets since Covid. Velandia noted that farmers markets in urban areas in Tennessee have increased in size, but rural markets are smaller, and some have nearly died. Shawn Wright (Kentucky) said that Eastern Kentucky is still seeing good use of farmers markets.

D. The group discussed Objective 4, continuing market research in the participating states on consumer preferences and marketing channels that are most effective and profitable for small farms.

1. Woods is conducting an 1,100-household survey on market channel use and awareness of local foods. This is a Kentucky-wide survey looking at changes by consumers due to inflation. It is also looking at awareness of and purchases of the Kentucky Proud brand.

E. Discussion of activities in the participating states

1. Participants gave summaries of the activities in their states. Please see the attached state reports for details of activities in the participating states.

F. Discussion of opportunities for collaboration

1. The group plans to move forward with crop evaluation research on low-input, high-return crops, and will choose among onions, potatoes, and carrots.
2. The group decided to continue the SERA 45 project beyond September 30, 2024. Lesley Oliver (AA, Kentucky) shared that the group needed to submit an updated Issues and Justification section of the current proposal within the next two to three weeks. Oliver said the renewal proposal is due by March 15, 2024. Woods, Stock, and Jett agreed to write the proposal. Potential areas of collaboration include research on additional crops (onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots), cut flower production and marketing research and extension activities, high tunnel research, production research in response to climate change, and marketing research in response to changes resulting from Covid.

Election of officers:

The group chose to deal with the selection of a chair and vice-chair for the coming year via email.

2024 Annual Meeting

Jett suggested meeting in-person at The Ohio State University South Centers in Piketon. Kleinhenz mentioned Columbus and Wooster, OH, as additional possible sites.