

## News

### North Carolina Research Campus, Kannapolis

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### **Local Farmer Awarded Funding from N.C. Value-Added Cost Share Program**

#### *Ramping up Production and Marketing of Ramps, a Smoky Mountain Native Plant*

KANNAPOLIS, N.C. – The Smoky Mountain Native Plants Association (SMNPA), based in Graham County, was a recipient of an N.C. Value-Added Cost Share (NCVACS) award. When declining tobacco revenues prompted farmers to explore new options, 23 western North Carolina growers turned to the resources of their region: native plants. In 2000, they formed SMNPA, an association now numbering more than 60 members. The mission of SMNPA is to help farmers earn income through growing, collecting, processing and marketing Appalachian native plants while preserving those plants and the culture and heritage of the region.

The Value-Added Ramp Project is a SMNPA venture that will benefit from the NCVACS award. The NCVACS program will help reduce the costs of applying for a USDA Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG). The federal grant provides its recipients with supplemental funding for business growth and development. Ramps (*Allium tricoccum*) are wild leeks that can be eaten fresh or dried and added to recipes for culinary zest.

NCVACS is administered by N.C. MarketReady, a program of N.C. Cooperative Extension located at the N.C. Research Campus in Kannapolis. Funded by the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, the cost share program was launched in 2009 to encourage more North Carolina producers to apply for federal funding and to generate more competitive applications. The association's award consists of a \$3,500 cost share for grant writing assistance for the VAPG-Planning grant and \$10,000 for USDA matching funds, contingent on receipt of the USDA grant.

The Value-Added Ramp Project currently provides 50 local, seasonal jobs when no other work is available, plus four year-round jobs. The ramp harvest and processing season lasts three to six weeks each spring. Part of SMNPA's goal in pursuing federal funding is to develop new ramp products, enhance marketing and ultimately grow this project to provide work for farm families in and around Graham County.

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Currently 30 percent of the ramps used by SMNPA are farm raised with the remainder collected from wild populations. SMNPA supports ongoing research of ramp cultivation as a non-timber forest product for a tobacco replacement crop. Eventually, the association hopes to abandon wild harvest in favor of 100 percent farm-raised ramps for value-added ramp products. Harvest pressure on wild populations has been increasing with the popularity of cooking shows that highlight the limited availability and intense, pungent qualities of ramp. A one-gallon plastic bag of ramps may be valued as high as \$60.

Carol Lawson and Beverly Whitehead supervise the SMNPA Value-Added Ramp Project. The two have developed an intensive 18-hour training program for kitchen staff during the processing season. Harvesters collect the ramps and deliver them to SMNPA at the Stecoah Valley Food Ventures Kitchen, which is an FDA-certified food manufacturing facility. The processing consists of separating the leaves, triple rinsing, cutting the bulb-stem from the flat leaf and dehydrating using the proprietary methods they developed.

The dehydrated ramps are processed further depending on the end product. Currently available products are ramp flakes, ramp seasoning, ramp salt and ramp-infused cornmeal. With the financial assistance of the VAPG they will explore new packaging for their products, and recipe development.

The ramp products are available in retail stores, mostly in western North Carolina. While a Web store may be in their future, the limited Internet connectivity has prohibited their efforts to expand their online presence, which now consists of an informational Web site ([www.smpa.org](http://www.smpa.org)).

The SMNPA has been successful in obtaining grant funding. Despite achieving a success rate of more than 50 percent, SMNPA would not be pursuing this avenue of federal funding without assistance from NCVACS. Whitehead oversees funding procurement and explored the USDA grant in 2003, ultimately abandoning the effort, finding that the detail required for the application was overwhelming for the time and resources they had available. The NCVACS program, by providing grant writers who have previous experience with the VAPG, is alleviating the stress associated with their prior effort.

Expanding their product line and enhancing their marketing effort will go a long way toward producing viable jobs and income through ramp production and processing. They hope it leads to a model for other alternative agriculture enterprises in counties where many families were dependent on a tobacco income.

**N.C. MarketReady**, formerly known as the Program for Value-Added & Alternative Agriculture, is a program of N.C. Cooperative Extension, which is an educational outreach of N.C. State University and N.C. A&T State University. N.C. MarketReady's multidisciplinary team builds partnerships and educational resources to help North Carolina agriculture be more profitable. N.C. MarketReady is a partner of the Plants for Human Health Institute at the N.C. Research Campus in Kannapolis. Learn more at [www.ncmarketready.org](http://www.ncmarketready.org) or [www.ces.ncsu.edu](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu).

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