

News

North Carolina Research Campus, Kannapolis

April 13, 2010

Media Contact: Leah Chester-Davis, coordinator of communications and community outreach, N.C. MarketReady, 704-250-5406 or leah_chester-davis@ncsu.edu

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

Windcrest Farm Finds Niche with Grafted Heirloom Tomato Transplants

KANNAPOLIS, N.C. – Mary Roberts of Windcrest Farm in Monroe, N.C., was one of nine recipients of the N.C. Value-Added Cost Share (NCVACS) awards. Roberts is a lifelong organic gardener. Following a career in corporate marketing, she’s found a new pace on her 14-acre property in Monroe. After several years of growing certified organic produce for the Matthews Farmers Market, she’s shifting focus from field production to greenhouse production. Not greenhouse vegetables, but vegetable transplants, particularly grafted heirloom tomato transplants. In only her second year growing grafted tomatoes, Windcrest Farm has received inquiries from as far away as Oregon and requests for quantities 10 times greater than the farm’s production capacity allows.

Heirloom tomatoes are desired for their complex flavors, but typically are challenging to grow since they aren’t resistant to common soil borne diseases. The grafted plants offer heirloom fruit *and* disease resistance, which is conveyed through a hybrid rootstock. This value-added product is in high demand but there are unique production challenges Roberts must overcome to grow the business. Grafted tomatoes currently account for less than five percent of the farm’s production. With financial assistance from NCVACS, Roberts will apply for a 2010 USDA Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG) for Working Capital to expand production capacity of grafted heirloom tomato transplants.

NCVACS is administered by N.C. MarketReady, a program of N.C. Cooperative Extension located at the N.C. Research Campus. The cost share program, funded by the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, was launched in 2009 to encourage more North Carolina producers to apply for the VAPG federal funds and to generate more competitive applications. The first cycle of NCVACS was designed to provide supplemental funding for producers to work with professionals who provide grant writing services and perform feasibility assessments. Roberts’ award consists of a \$3,500 cost share for grant writing assistance for the VAPG-Working Capital grant and \$20,000 for a feasibility assessment.

If Roberts receives the federal funding, she plans to double her production area by erecting a second 30-foot by 96-foot greenhouse. She also will train additional labor to assist with the tedious grafting process. Even proficient grafters can generate only 50 to 100 grafted plants per hour. Windcrest Farm

(more)

Local Farmer Awarded Funding from N.C. Value-Added Cost Share Program, p. 2

produced 2,000 grafted tomato transplants in 2009. In six years, she hopes to have the facilities and labor to produce 200,000 grafted transplants.

A grafted heirloom tomato transplant is produced by selecting two tomato varieties: a hybrid rootstock for vigor and disease resistance and an heirloom scion, or “top,” for productivity and fruit quality. The two varieties are grown under specific greenhouse conditions and grafted together to form a disease-resistant plant that produces flavorful and highly marketable fruit. “Grafting produces a product that lessens reliance on disease controls for organic and conventional tomato growers,” says Roberts.

Grafting is a common practice in Asia and Europe for greenhouse and field production, though it is still relatively new in North America. The greenhouse tomato industry has been first to embrace the utility of grafted varieties. Availability of commercially produced grafted transplants is one limiting factor for more widespread adoption of these transplants, which are most appealing to organic producers.

Roberts grafts tomatoes for two seasons—the traditional spring season for field or garden crops and the fall season for greenhouse tomato growers who plant in September. The seasonal nature of the enterprise is another challenge for finding and retaining trained labor. Grafting requires care and precision. Not only do potential employees need to have flexibility for seasonal employment, they must have patience and high aptitude for attention to detail. Roberts has attended several workshops to improve her grafting technique. She is developing proprietary tools that will foster uniformity and improve efficiency.

Windcrest Farm relies heavily on a pre-order system. Roberts has outlined a schedule that takes into account when area growers will be planting and establishes cut-off dates for pre-orders. In addition to growing for pre-orders, Roberts grows inventory for retail sales. She has been a vendor at the Matthews Farmers Market for four years and looks to attend additional local markets in 2010. She sells organic vegetable and herb transplants as well as organic produce and cut flowers. However, the produce portion of the business will be minimized as she shifts the focus of time and labor to grafted tomatoes. She believes that urban gardeners are a large potential market for the grafted heirloom tomatoes. Urban gardens often have a limited amount of space that may not allow for proper crop rotation. Without crop rotation, soil borne pathogens can build up in the soil and result in plant disease problems. The disease resistant rootstock and heirloom scion provide the best of both worlds for the urban gardener.

In addition to greenhouse production, Windcrest Farm offers educational courses for children and adults who have an interest in growing their own food. For more information about Windcrest Farm, visit www.windcrestorganics.com.

(more)

Local Farmer Awarded Funding from N.C. Value-Added Cost Share Program, p. 3

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 or www.ces.ncsu.edu.

###

Writer: Megan Bame