Small Farms Week '08 to get berry good kickoff

Alternatives to tobacco production in the western region of North Carolina are ranging from the Christmas industry — trees, wreaths, boxwoods and agrotourism — to specialty feasts, vegetables and herbs. One of the fastest growing and most potentially profitable alternative agricultural industries for the Piedmont and mountain areas is shaping up to be the dichotomous blackberry, rebranded for its prickly brush but revered for its sweet, delicious fruit.

Discussions about western region alternative crops, including blackberries and raspberries, are on tap during opening-day ceremonies for the annual Small Farms Week celebration. Sponsored by The Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T, this year’s Small Farms Week is scheduled for March 30 through April 5, with an opening day program at Catawba Valley Community College’s Taylorsville campus, where experts will speak on alternative crops for western North Carolina.

“Bramble fruit is a growing industry, fueled by consumer recognition of the health values of berries,” says Ellen Smoak, Cooperative Extension’s western region coordinator. “The market is exploding right now.”

A demand in the market-place for blackberries, which not only taste good but have health benefits that include a possible role in preventing breast and cervical cancer, has combined with opportunity to give western region farmers a foothold in the berry industry. A typical blackberry season ends in June, but the foothill region’s climate can position the berries for later production extending the season into July, says Dr. Gina Fernandez, a horticulture specialist at N.C. State and one of the state’s leading authorities on the “bramble industry.”

“We’re working with varieties that do really well in the southeastern part of the United States,” Fernandez says.

Consider that in 2006, there were about 17 acres of blackberries being planted, mostly on small farms in the region, says Cleveland County Agricultural Extension Agent Daniel Shires. In 2007, that acreage had increased to more than 100, and by the end of this year at least 200 acres of blackberries will be grown, Shires projects. The increase by farmers has resulted in an advocacy network that the western North Carolina farmers are discovering is their late-season blackberry market allows them to command a higher price for their fruit because the berries are still in high demand, but the local supply has dwindled. Western-region farmers were getting between $17 and $20 per flat of berries, with one acre of land able to produce 2,000 flats. At that formula, farmers could make $34,000 to $40,000 per acre for the berries, before expenses.

“Our berries open when there is no other berry available at this point of the season,” Shires says.

Mexico produces blackberries for the spring market, followed by Florida berries in May and Georgia and other local berries in peak season in June. After that the western North Carolina region has emerged as the berry supplier for July.

Adds Shires: “The outlook is great for these farmers because we fit into a niche environment.”

Trials at the research station in Laurel Springs are also looking at raspberry production for even higher elevations such as Yancey and Ashe counties.
Small Farms Week Schedule of Events March 30 – April 5

Monday, March 31
10 a.m. — Kickoff
CATAWBA VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE, TAYLORSVILLE
(1-42 to exit 131, NC 16, then 16 miles on NC 16 to 345 Industrial Blvd.)
The theme for Small Farms Week 2008 Kickoff is “Farm to Fork: Alternative Crops for Western NC” Lenny Rogers, Alexander County Cooperative Extension director, will be presiding. Deborah Crandall, director for Cooperative Extension’s West Central District, will bring greetings and Alexander County Commissioner William Hammmer will issue the official welcome.
The 2007 Small Farmer of the Year Video Dr. Ellen Davis, regional program coordinator for the Cooperative Extension Program at A&T’s Western District, will introduce the video, which features Gary Morrell of Alexander County, the 2007 Gilmer L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmer of the Year.
10:30 a.m. — Panel Discussion: Marketing Sustainable Agriculture in Western NC
Moderator: Bill Hanlin, Extension agent for Alexander and Wilkes counties
Panelists:
Dr. Deana Fernandez, an Extension specialist and researcher with NC State University, specializes in blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, and the emerging small fruit industries in North Carolina.
Dr. Jeanie Davis, an NC State Extension specialist and researcher, is the community coordinator of the NC Specialty Crops Program at the Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center in Fletcher, NC. Davis’ alternative crop specialties include medicinal herbs and heirloom vegetables.
Mike Lanier, one of Extension’s area agribusiness agents, has been working in Orange and adjacent counties to create networking infrastructures for farmers marketing commodities directly to local consumers.
Noon — Lunch on site
Lunchspeaker: Dr. Stacy Tomasi, Extension sustainable tourism parks, recreation & tourism management specialist Tomasi’s topic will be “Agrotourism in Western NC”
1 to 3 p.m. — Tour of Gary Morrell’s Greengo Orchard
(184 Hummingbird Lane, Taylorsville)
Tuesday, April 1
1 to 4 p.m. — Educational Forums: Demonstrations in Animal Agriculture*
A&T STATE UNIVERSITY FARM
1 p.m. — Pastures, Fences and Equipment for Pastured Swine Production Mike Jones, Extension associate
2 p.m. — Goat Hoof Trimming and Administration of Medications Dr. Ralph Noble, NC A&T State University Dept. of Animal Sciences and Gary Summers, A&T research technician
3 p.m. — Forages for Pastured Poultry Dr. Willie Wills, NC A&T Dept. of Animal Sciences, Richie Holtsie, Extension associate; and Anthony Hooks, A&T research technician
5 to 8 p.m. — Local Foods Supper and Roundtable on “Branding Your Local Product” HOLIDAY INN EXPRESS (3114 Cedar Park Road — I-85 & Lee Street)
Panelists:
David Roach, founder of Mo’ Better Food, an Oakland, CA, organization that is uniting African American farmers and urban consumers.
Charlie Jackson, whose consumer information work in western North Carolina has people buying locally and thinking “Appalachian Grown.”
Lee Menius, the field coordinator for the North Carolina CHOICES livestock program, which is finding markets for livestock that is certified organic, antibiotic-free, and environmentally friendly.
Dr. John O’Sullivan, farm management and marketing specialist for The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T, has varied experiences “Ramping up the Tailgait Market Brand.”
Wednesday, April 2
Small Farmers Appreciation Day at NC A&T*
9 to 11 a.m. — Farm to Fork: Concurrent Sessions
HOLIDAY INN EXPRESS (3114 Cedar Park Road — I-85 & Lee Street)
Presiding: Dr. Keith Baldwin, Program Leader, The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T
Session I: The Ins and Outs of Marketing Livestock Locally Dr. Beth Yongue, a veterinarian and administrator with the NC Department of Agriculture & Consumer Sciences Meat and Poultry Division, Joe DelPrado, president of Hain Pure Protein Corporation; and Brantley Bumsfite and Mike Lamer of NC Cooperative Extension will lead the program.
Session II: To Market, To Market: Selling Products from Rural Counties in Urban Markets Program leader will be David Roach of Mo’ Better Food.
Session III: (at the Horticulture Unit at the University Farm) Richie Holtsie and Steve Moore of Cooperative Extension will be covering high tunnel production, forcing spring bulbs and lettuce.
Noon — Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon ALUMNI FOUNDATION EVENTS CENTER (Bluford Street and Benbow Road at the A&T campus)
Panelists:
Dr. M. Ray McKinnie, associate dean and administrator for The Cooperative Extension Program, will be presiding; Steve Trousdle, North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture and Dr. Alton Thompson, dean of the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at A&T, will have a few remarks before the featured speaker is introduced.
Speaker: Frank Taylor, Winston County Self Help Cooperative (Louisville, MS)
The Winston County Self Help Cooperative provides educational programs and assistance to meet the agricultural needs of community members ranging from youth to seniors. Taylor and his organization are widely recognized and have won several awards. They are members of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives.
Student Research Poster Competition Winners ALUMNI FOUNDATION EVENTS CENTER The Agricultural Research Program and the A&T chapter of Gamma Sigma Delta, the honor society for agriculture, have a research poster contest for SAES students in conjunction with Small Farms Week each year. The three top entries in both the graduate and undergraduate competitions will be on display at the Alumni Foundation Events Center during the Small Farmers Appreciation Day luncheon.
Session IV: Marketing Sustainable Agriculture in Western NC Panel Discussion*
The panelists will include:
Dr. Alton Thompson, advisor and professor at NC A&T*
Dr. William Hammer, associate; and
Dr. Ellen Davis, dean of the School of Agriculture & Consumer Sciences at NC A&T*
Speaker: Frank Taylor, Winston County Self Help Cooperative (Louisville, MS)
Wednesday, April 2
Small Farmers Appreciation Day and Educational Forum
9 to 11 a.m. — Holiday Inn Express & University Farm
Educational Forum: Farm to Fork: Concurrent Sessions
I. Marketing Livestock locally
II. Selling farm products from rural counties in urban markets
III. High tunnel production
Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon, Frank Taylor featured speaker
Noon — NC A&T State University Alumni Center
*
A $30 registration fee is required for Tuesday and Wednesday activities. Small farmers who have registered in advance are exempt. Registration deadline is March 14.

Small Farms Week Registration Form

Each individual should complete a separate registration form. Check each of the events you will attend.

Day
Event
Time / Location
Monday, March 31
Small Farms Week Kickoff and activities
10 a.m. — Kickoff at the Catawba Valley Community College, Taylorsville
Marketing Sustainable Agriculture in Western NC Panel Discussion
10:30 a.m. — Catawba Valley Community College, Taylorsville
Kickoff luncheon
Noon — Catawba Valley Community College, Taylorsville
Tour of Greengo Orchard
1:30 to 3 p.m. — Greengo Orchard (184 Hummingbird Lane, Taylorsville)
Tuesday, April 1
Educational Forums: Demonstrations in Animal Agriculture
10 a.m. — University Farm
Local Foods Supper and Roundtable
5 to 8 p.m. — Holiday Inn Express (3114 Cedar Park Rd. — I-85 & Lee Street)
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Name
City
State/Zip
Telephone Number
E-mail address
Affiliation (please check the appropriate box(es))
□ Small farmer
□ Cooperative Extension employee
□ Agency representative, agency name
□ Other, indicate name of group/organization
□ Individual
□ Fax this form to (336) 256-0810
□ e-mail to deborahh@ncat.edu
□ call (336) 256-0812
□ mail to: The Cooperative Extension Program NC A&T State University P.O. Box 21929, Greensboro, NC 27420

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