Client Education Programs for Specialty Crops: Introduction to the Workshop

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Extension programs are undergoing massive cutbacks and downsizing, while public demand for specialty crops in the market continues to increase. Expansion is occurring in niche markets and in response to the wide variety of fruits and vegetables now found in supermarkets. All of these changes increase demands for information and time from extensionists. Furthermore, research on applied problems of specialty crops has a low priority for many researchers, who see little reward in working with these crops. Such programs have low potential for scientific publication, and an even lower potential for external funding. These diametrically opposed trends leave the extension specialist in the middle. Extension specialists are left in a quandary on how to provide clientele with locally adapted, research-based, sound, proven information.

The purpose of this workshop was to share successes and failures in educational programs with specialty crops. Development of extension programs, where little supportive research is available, offer opportunity for innovation. Significant monetary investment by clients of these programs makes them very important. How to deal with educational and informational demands from these publics are discussed.

This workshop was structured to present information from outstanding extension programs. The authors deal with specialty crops as part of educational programs. All of them have programs that also are responsible for large-scale commercial crops. Programs for small fruit, vegetables, and herbs are discussed.

I believe you will find the approaches reported here to be innovative, time-efficient, technically sound, and clientele-responsive. Some of the information will be applicable to other programs directly; other parts of the presentations will require adaptation. Regardless of their responsibilities, extensionists will be able to find useful information in these presentations.

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