



**STATE OF MISSISSIPPI  
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE  
ANDY GIPSON  
COMMISSIONER**

# **PRESS RELEASE**

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## **MS Department of Agriculture and Commerce Receives Specialty Crop Block Grant**

**JACKSON, Miss.** - Commissioner Andy Gipson announced that the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce has been awarded a \$441,411.23 grant from USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops grown in Mississippi through the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program.

"The specialty crop industry is an important part of Mississippi agriculture, accounting for more than \$230 million of our state's agriculture industry. This Specialty Crop Block Grant Program helps further this industry by providing valuable education, marketing and research that can be passed on to our producers," said Gipson.

The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce is partnering with four agricultural entities to promote the state's specialty crop industry through research, educational opportunities, promotional campaigns, and the development of marketing and educational tools. The partnerships include the Farm Families of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, The Piney Woods School and South Mississippi Farmers Market Association.

- The Farm Families of Mississippi will develop and implement a promotional campaign to educate the public on the benefits of buying and consuming local honey.
- Mississippi State University will utilize the Specialty Crop Grant Program to:
  - Research and identify the barriers and costs of implementing Good Agricultural Practices and challenges faced by producers of various operation size;
  - Research genetic techniques and cultivation practices to establish the cause of white drupelet disorder in blackberries;
  - Research to determine the influence of auxin herbicides on sweet potato plants and crop impact;
  - Identify weed-suppressive sweet potato cultivars and cover crop strategies that could enhance profitability and adoption of organic sweet potato production;
  - Research crop yield, quality and nutrient composition of grafted tomato cultivars compared to ungrafted plants in a high tunnel production system for improved productivity and disease resistance;

- Determine appropriate planting densities and utilizing plant growth regulators to increase flowering and seed yields of four native wildflower species;
- Conduct variety trials and develop recommendations on leafy vegetables and microgreen crops;
- Design a high tunnel training program based on current use, successes and pitfalls among specialty crop producers in Mississippi;
- Investigate potential of using late fruiting cultivars and high tunnel systems to extend blueberry harvest season into fall; and
- Develop tea propagation systems using sexual and asexual methods.
- The Piney Woods School will educate students on farming and marketing practices of small-scale vegetable farming.
- The South Mississippi Farmers Market Association will create a series of festivals to increase consumption and awareness of specialty crops.
- The Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum will educate visitors on winter specialty crops grown in the state.
- The Mississippi Department of Agriculture will continue its effort to educate school children by providing school garden grants.

The Specialty Crop Block Grant Program is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and authorized by the Farm, Food, and Jobs Bill (Farm Bill). The purpose of the program is to solely enhance the competitiveness of Mississippi's specialty crop industry. Specialty crops are defined as fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture and nursery crops (including floriculture).

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