

## ALTERNATIVE CROPS IN SOUTHEAST NEBRASKA

Earlier this month I attended the Rural Advantage/Healthy Farms Conference in Lincoln. This conference addressed topics involving sustainable agriculture, alternative crops and other different cropping strategies. Two of the sessions I attended discussed alternative crops that were grown in Nebraska this past year. One of the crops, aronia berries has been grown right here in southeast Nebraska by Kennedy Orchards near Brownville the past three years. The other crop was hops. It was grown in eastern Nebraska near Forth Calhoun in Douglas County, near Prague in Saunders County and near Abie in Butler County. For those of you unfamiliar with hops, it is a plant that is grown and used for brewing beer. Much of the hops used in beer are grown in the Northwest in the U.S. or in Europe. In Nebraska though, there are 12 micro-breweries that are producing local beer and are interested in using locally grown hops for their beers.

It was very interesting learning about these two very different crops. Probably the most interesting thing about both crops was the enthusiasm the growers had in discussing their operations. The good thing about both these crops is that they are both perennials, meaning they will come back year after year. We know we can grow aronia berries in southeast Nebraska. Last year would have been a bumper crop had it not been for a windstorm that blew many of the berries on the ground. There is much interest through Nebraska in further developing a market for this crop and also forming a cooperative of growers. Sawmill Hollow Organic Orchard near Missouri Valley, Iowa began growing aronia berries in 1995 and now have 13,000 plants on their farm, selling aronia berries frozen and a variety of products made from aronia berries plus aronia berry plants to farmers interested in getting started in the production of aronia berries. The main selling point of this fruit is its health benefits. It is higher in anti-oxidants than blueberries, blackberries and cranberries. It fights cancer and heart disease. Aronia berries make delicious jelly, ice cream and yogurt flavoring, barbecue sauce and tea. You will be hearing more about this value-added plant in the coming year.

Hops did very well in 2009 under some very good growing conditions throughout the state. There are currently only six growers in Nebraska, three in eastern Nebraska and three in the central part of the state. Hops grow on vines that grow up poles 20 feet in the air and are connected with twine. Currently everything is hand-harvested and processed on the farms. Some of the hops are being used fresh for brewing which will provide a unique taste for seasonally produced local beers. There is interest in development of a cooperative for the hops growers as well. They would possibly like to purchase a harvester and develop a mill where the hops can be processed at a central location. While this crop is in its infancy in Nebraska, it is admirable how enthusiastic these farmers are and the pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit they show as they proceed in this value-added venture. It will be interesting to see how and if this value-added enterprise grows in Nebraska. Any enterprise that can be developed to improve the local economy, add jobs and potentially help keep rural Nebraska prosperous and revitalized should be investigated. For more information about these crops, feel free to contact me at (402) 274-4755.

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