Kentucky’s proximity to half the nation’s population, coupled with its temperate climate, makes horticultural crop production enticing to many Kentucky farmers. And with diminishing quota for tobacco growers, many farmers who previously hadn’t considered horticultural crops as part of their farming mix are now thinking about them or experimenting with them on their farms.

UK Extension specialists, agents and researchers are developing and testing new techniques of vegetable production and conducting educational programs to help farmers shorten the time needed to become really successful in horticultural production. In just the last nine months, Extension specialists and agents have conducted 56 county and multi-county meetings about fruit and vegetable production, according to Dewayne Ingram, chair of the horticulture department.

“The changing tobacco situation is creating a great deal of interest in diversification. Many are looking at vegetable and fruit production. Just in the Mammoth Cave area, we’ve got 80 growers either producing vegetable crops or contemplating doing so,” said Brent Rowell, Extension vegetable specialist.

Already, Rowell said, the excitement over the prospect of vegetable production as a means of diversifying Kentucky’s farms has led to the creation of three new cooperatives for producing, packing, shipping and marketing vegetable crops.

“The potential for growing and marketing horticulture crops is tremendous. Kentucky producers currently are estimated to be producing $40 million in produce on about 15,000 acres. Increasing those numbers significantly is highly possible,” Rowell said.

One Producer’s Story

Bill Gallrein, a Shelbyville producer, began large-scale production in 1986, when he and his father sold their dairy operation. Today, Gallrein produces 100 acres of sweet corn, 30 acres of beans, 20 acres of pumpkins, 5 acres of yellow squash, 3 acres of strawberries and 15,000 square feet of greenhouse annuals.

Gallrein said the Extension Service has been very helpful in getting his business going.

“We use the variety trial information provided by UK to make decisions on what varieties to plant, and the horticulturists have come to our farm many times to show us new technologies that we’ve later adopted,” Gallrein said.

Gallrein is like most Kentucky producers who sell at least some of their produce through some sort of direct marketing, said Tim Woods, Extension economist for horticultural products.

“In a survey of producers we found that 82 percent of Kentucky producers sell through direct markets, such as roadside markets or ‘you pick’ operations. About 29 percent of producers also indicated that they sold at least some of their produce to local groceries and retail establishments,” Woods said.

New Technologies Reduce Risk

Rowell said that each year, he and Extension associate Dave Spalding work with a number of tobacco producers to demonstrate how horticulture crops can fit into the farming operation.

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Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service programs are locally defined and locally administered. Here are a few examples of county Extension programs that are making a real difference in people’s lives.

**Simple Procedure Nets $1 Million Each Year**
The Hickman County Cooperative Extension Service sponsored winter meetings on calibrating and adjusting corn planters that led to yields improving by an average of 10 to 14 bushels per acre. As a result of better calibration and adjustments to corn planters, farmers in Hickman County improved incomes by $957,000 per year.

**Learning How To Be a Parent**
Parenting doesn’t always come naturally or easily – sometimes lessons help. The Livingston County Cooperative Extension Service, in response to needs identified by the Livingston County Concerned Citizens and the Family First Advisory Council, taught parenting classes. At each of the six 60- to 90-minute classes, participants discussed how they practiced techniques they learned at the previous class; this was an important first step before they learned a new technique. An evaluation showed that all participants made at least one change in their parenting skills.

**Coat-a-Kid Program**
Brrr! Winter’s coming and it’s cold out there. The Ohio County Extension Service 4-H Teen Club developed the Octoberfest Pumpkin Decorating Contest to raise money to purchase and distribute coats to needy children. As a result of their efforts, 25 economically deprived youth received warm, new coats and the members of the teen club learned new leadership skills.

**More Beef, More Profits**
The Barren County Extension Service suggested that six beef producers commingle their feeder calves at weaning for backgrounding and cooperative marketing. Steers were fed 60 days and heifers were fed 100 days. All cattle received uniform vaccination, deworming and implanting. The result was that some of the steers brought $80 more in profit than if they had been sold at weaning; other steers brought an increased $40 per head in profit.

**Safe Food Preservation**
In many rural areas, passing down home preservation techniques from generation to generation is a cherished tradition. The problem is that the techniques may be old, outdated or dangerous. The Lee County Cooperation Extension Service, recognizing a need to maintain the tradition while updating the process, sponsored a food preservation workshop. Participants were given a food preservation manual and recipes that could be prepared safely. One low income family learned to use a pressure cooker and canned 600 quarts of fruits and vegetables.

**Youth Learn Safety Skills**
Eighty young people and 35 adults learned about safety in fire arms, lawn equipment, all terrain vehicles, large animals, sun protection, large machinery, fires and electricity in a joint program between the Cooperative Extension Services in Larue and Hardin Counties. The young people attended a safety camp conducted by the Lincoln Trail Farm Safety and Health Task Force.

**Better Bulls**
A bull leasing program was initiated by the Woodford County Cooperative Extension Service four years ago for beef producers with fewer than 20 cows. The emphasis on the program is to provide high quality genetics for these producers. Currently, producers have used the bulls on nearly 600 head of cattle. Average weaning weights have improved by 79 pounds since the introduction of the program.

**We Can See Clearly Now**
The Henry County Cooperative Extension Service sponsored a home-based business seminar. Nearly 30 individuals from four counties attended the four-week series, which included information on establishing a business, getting organized, developing a business plan and promoting the business. Prior to the program, 90 percent
described their business plans as hazy; afterward, half had developed a clear vision of their business plan. One participant said, “I learned that I need to hire a CPA and fire my sister-in-law. There is a lot we haven’t been doing right!”

**Encouraging Teen Leadership**

The Campbell County Cooperative Extension Service formed a coalition with the gifted and talented programs from five school districts in the county to develop a leadership skills program for young people. The program reached 96 teens from the five schools and was supported by a grant from the Kentucky Department of Education Division of Professional Development. In addition to emphasizing leadership skills, the program also taught community awareness, community pride and team building.

**To Market, To Market**

Scott County has been a leader in commercial vegetable production for several years; yet, its growth was hindered by marketing constraints. The Scott County Cooperative Extension Service worked with the Central Kentucky Growers’ Association and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture to procure a $180,000 grant to construct a facility to handle vegetable crops. Another $50,000 was obtained locally and from the state government. The Scott County Fiscal Court provided land, utility access and site preparation for the project. This infrastructure should help Central Kentuckians market their vegetables more profitably.

**Growing Good Kids**

We know that young people who develop strong communication, problem-solving and group process skills become competent members of society. The Fleming County Cooperative Extension Service developed a one-day “Growing Good Kids Leadership Workshop” for 225 of the county’s elementary students. Evaluation of the program showed that 76 percent were changing their practices to become better leaders, 88 percent reported feeling more confident as a leader and 84 percent reported improved communication skills.

**Safer Food**

It’s common for civic groups to serve or sell food at meetings and special events. These groups sometimes operate with limited facilities. Because improper food handling causes nearly 80 percent of reported food-related sicknesses, it is important that these “every-now-and-then” food handlers have adequate knowledge of food safety. The Russell County Cooperative Extension Service sponsored food safety training for 122 members of 9 groups. Contact with the groups three months after the training showed that all were following safe food-handling techniques.

**Preparing for the Worst**

As if natural disasters weren’t bad enough by themselves, in Elliott County they were often compounded by lack of information about when services would be restored. In response, the Elliott County Cooperative Extension Service brought all appropriate disaster agencies together to develop a disaster plan. As a result, the electric service and the telephone cooperatives agreed to purchase a generator to operate the Sandy Hook Water pumps during power outages; the electric cooperative also agreed to install a dedicated phone line for the department of emergency services director; and local media agreed to provide quick information to consumers about the disaster.

**Are You Being Served?**

Working with the Harlan Tourist and Convention Commission, the Harlan County Cooperative Extension Service hosted a hospitality training session for leaders of 19 businesses. Participants learned communication skills, hospitality principles and how to deliver courteous service.
One of the principal missions of a land-grant university is to provide timely, research-based information to all citizens. To achieve this more effectively, all of the Commonwealth’s county Cooperative Extension Service offices must be equipped with modern information technology. Only a few years ago we were debating whether to invest in technology. Today, it is no longer an option; it is a necessity. We must view information technology as an asset for the future.

County Extension Agents use computers for developing and delivering educational programs, for communication by e-mail, and for access to the Internet. However to improve effectiveness and expand capacity, these computers must be directly linked to the Kentucky Information Highway (KIH).

Connection to the KIH would enable county offices of the Cooperative Extension Service to send and receive two-way video, web video and data communications that can be used by faculty:

- to present educational programs to many sites throughout the state without having to travel to each county,
- to give demonstrations and diagnose plant and animal diseases, and
- to conduct training with two-way audio and visual communication.

This would enhance the quality, access and productivity of our organization. However, information technology must be used to transform the educational process, not simply to refine existing programs and practices.

In this high-speed era, it is essential that all Kentuckians have access to research-based information as they need it, when they need it, and where they need it. Not everyone can attend a meeting when it is scheduled, nor is it always offered when it is needed. With the many demands on people’s time, information must be packaged for the convenience of the user.

Continuing education, retraining, and a responsive information flow can be greatly enhanced statewide through the “connectivity” of County Extension Agents. This goal can be achieved with the enhanced information technologies that will enable Extension Agents to access more information in a timely manner and to deliver it to clientele. Kentucky residents are calling for it, and we as an organization must respond.

Walter J. Walla
Associate Dean and Associate Director