



LEOPOLD CENTER  
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

# Assessing the market potential of specialty forest products in local food systems

Abstract: Non-timber specialty forest products show potential for farmers hoping to diversify their operations. This project and survey evaluated the interest in and obstacles to the production and marketing of these crops.

## Question & Answer

**Q:** Is there a viable market for specialty forest products in Iowa?

**A:** Yes. Nut producers have been successfully marketing to restaurants and health food stores or directly to consumers for several years. Producers of other specialty forest products, such as berries or woody decorative florals, currently tend to sell their products to retail florists or directly to consumers through on-farm sales or at farmers markets. These are definitely niche crops, but for producers willing to invest time in marketing, there seems to be plenty of demand in the market place.

## Background

One avenue to increase diversification and bring more revenue to small and midsize farmers is the production of non-timber specialty forest products (SFPs) such as fruits, nuts, woody decorative florals, and mushrooms. The potential for production and marketing of these products is not well documented in Iowa. Trees Forever proposed to study the possibilities for these SFPs in southeastern and north central Iowa. This project looked at these factors:

- Existence of potential markets for SFPs;
- Comparisons of the acceptance of agroforestry practices in the two regions which have very different

demographic, ecological, and agricultural characteristics; and

- Possible role for the existing Trees Forever Iowa Buffer Initiative network of landowners who already have taken land out of production to establish riparian buffers.

## Approach and methods

In 2004, Trees Forever interviewed 21 growers and 15 buyers in southeastern Iowa and in Linn, Black Hawk, and Wright counties and those counties adjacent. Producers were identified through the Trees Forever network of landowners, as well as through Trees Forever partners, the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture, and Practical Farmers of Iowa. Current or potential buyers were identified primarily through interviews with growers and through cold calls to florists and roadside stand operators.

The interviews were to identify:

- Current cultivation and demand for non-timber forest products,
- Grower awareness of potential for such crops, and
- Market requirements for product packaging and/or bundling.

## Results and discussion

Of the 21 producers interviewed, 19 are already selling edible crops and 15 are selling woody floral products. The products are being marketed directly to food cooperatives, a few local grocery stores, local health food

### Principal Investigator:

Carole Teator  
Trees Forever  
Marion

### Budget:

\$10,035 for year one

stores, and local florists, as well as at farmers markets, roadside stands, and on-farm retail outlets. Only two growers mentioned selling directly to restaurants; one markets nuts, while the other supplies floral arrangements.

Of the 15 buyers interviewed, nine are currently buying edible, non-timber forest products locally and are interested in finding more local sources of butternuts, walnuts, hickory nuts, and hazelnuts. The buyers of floral products frequently expressed interest in having a greater diversity of woody floral products. If they could obtain these things reliably and consistently, they would be more willing to buy locally. They indicated interest in products such as curly willow, pussy willow, bittersweet, pine cones, winterberry, snowberry, dogwood, forsythia, viburnum, lilac, hydrangea, grapevine, rosehips, and holiday greens.

A majority of the producers reported that they are producing as much as they care to, while many of the buyers suggested that there is still plenty of room in the market for these products, especially if the items are locally grown.

### Conclusions

While this study provides a picture of only a small portion of the current Iowa market, results seem to indicate potential for non-timber forest products to expand their sales. For producers already selling produce within local food system networks, these products offer an opportunity to expand their crops and seasons to include perennials such as berries and woody decorative florals.

A majority of producers indicated they are producing as much as they care to, while many of the buyers suggested that there is still plenty of market space for these products, especially those that are locally grown. A few producers worried about saturating the market if production were expanded, while others asserted that most people are unwilling to put forth the amount of labor required to market non-timber forest products.

Growers expressed an overwhelming need for assistance with the marketing and distribution of non-timber forest products and crops. Many suggested that cooperatives or brokers could be helpful. Those producers already in the Southeast Nut Growers Cooperative noted



how much of an asset the cooperative has been to their operations, especially as a network for peer-to-peer education and information, as well as for product distribution when supply exceeds demand among their regular customers. The cooperative also has taken steps to help with the challenge of processing products, particularly chestnuts.

If the need for education and information dissemination is being met, it is within established cooperatives and associations. However, for many of the newer niche products there is still a gap between research/experience and producers and small retail buyers. A large proportion of these groups are looking for education about how to price and better market their products within a competitive marketplace.





Susan Zacharakis farm

Although not considered a problem by buyers, it also is necessary to educate those who harvest and “donate” woody floral products to florists. These undoubtedly well-meaning harvesters need to be aware that they could be damaging a local industry by undercutting growers who are cultivating a crop such as bittersweet or grapevines.

In addition, the social marketing aspect of agroforestry needs to be emphasized; that is, the ability of the local



Carole Pierce making wreaths

growers to generate income from their non-timber specialty products leads to more viable rural communities and prosperous small and midsize farms.

#### **Impact of results**

The interviews and analysis completed for the project seem to confirm the original theory that the demand for non-timber specialty forest products exceeds the supply. The growers and buyers interviewed demonstrate that there is significant potential to sell to the market for those who make a commitment to grow and market these niche products.

Initially it was thought that because the southeastern portion of the state has more timber and already has walnut, chestnut, and pawpaw growers, agroforestry systems would be more readily adopted than in north central Iowa, which is not as heavily timbered and tends toward more row cropping and livestock production. Because a sufficient number of growers could not be found in north central Iowa, the project was unable to make solid comparisons. However, it was learned that nut production is gaining viability rapidly in southeast Iowa because of the years of research, experimentation, and networking that have already been done. Local production and marketing of woody florals was a very new market to a significant portion of the growers and buyers interviewed.

The research confirms that while neighboring states have made headway in marketing and production of specialty forest products, this market remains relatively untapped in Iowa where most of the activity tends to be within the established networks of sustainable agriculture farmers. This further highlights the potential benefits non-timber specialty forestry products offer small and midsize producers looking to diversify. Outreach and education for these groups will help them explore the opportunities in growing and marketing these perennial products.

**For more information, contact**  
Carole Teator, Trees Forever, 770 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Marion, Iowa  
52302; (319) 373-0650, e-mail [cteator@treesforever.org](mailto:cteator@treesforever.org)