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**North Carolina ag to be showcased at SEPC's Southern Exposure**

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By

Tim Linden

March 5, 2024

The North Carolina Department of Agriculture wants everyone to know that the state's produce industry is alive and well and even registering an uptick in fruit and vegetable production.

Overall, North Carolina is losing some farm acreage to housing and urban sprawl as the population continues to increase. In raw numbers, the state registered the third highest increase in population (140,000) in the United State in 2023. In percentages, its 1.3 percent growth rate over the past two years is fifth highest among the 50 states.

Kevin Hardison, marketing specialist for the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, said crops are competing against houses for land and there has been some overall decline. "But for fruits and vegetables, acreage is at least stable, and I think it has actually increased," he said. "We see farmers looking to transition to row crops as the demand for local and fresh continues to increase."

NCDA is going to be spreading that message at the Southeast Produce Council's Southern Exposure show. "We are bringing four companies with us to work in the booth," he said, "But we had to cap that as we had many more that wanted to come. There is only so much room in the booth."

The four companies accompanying NCDA to Southern Exposure are Ripe Revival Produce, Lewis Nursery and Farms, Pamlico Shores Produce and Triple J Produce. Among them they grow, ship and market a variety of fresh commodities, including white potatoes, organic and conventional sweet potatoes, several varieties of berries and a number of different vegetables.

Hardison said sweet potatoes are North Carolina's No. 1 specialty crop followed by watermelons, but the state has many other high value crops that deserve recognition as well. He noted the state's fresh strawberry production, both in greenhouses and in the field, has been on an upward trajectory for the past few years. The greenhouse berries are produced from November well into spring, with field-grown strawberries lasting through May, according to the NCDA marketing expert. Hardison has been with North Carolina's ag department for 23 years, spending the last two years in the marketing department. This will mark his second year attending Southern Exposure. Speaking of his longevity with the department, he quipped, "Let's just say I'm closer to the end of my career than the beginning."

He noted that the state has robust local vegetable production for most of the year with field peas, squash, lots of greens and cabbage highlighting the product list.

As an example of the growth in specialty crops, Hardison said two of the newer crops that he has crossed paths with are sesame seeds and purple carrots.

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## [Tim Linden](#)

### About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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