



**STATE OF MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE**

ANDY GIPSON
COMMISSIONER

PRESS RELEASE

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MDAC Awards Funding to Enhance Mississippi's Specialty Crop Industry

JACKSON, Miss. – Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson announced that the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) is awarding funding to Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University for projects enhancing the state's specialty crop industry. MDAC was awarded a \$419,995.50 grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops grown in Mississippi through its Specialty Crop Block Grant Program.

The Specialty Crop Block Grant Program is funded by the USDA and authorized under section 101 of the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004 (7 U.S.C. § 1621 note), as amended (Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act). The purpose of the program is to enhance the competitiveness of the specialty crop industry by leveraging efforts to market and promote specialty crops; assisting producers with research and development relevant to specialty crops; expanding availability and access to specialty crops; and addressing local, regional and national challenges confronting specialty crop producers. Specialty crops are defined as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture crops and nursery crops, including floriculture.

“Specialty crops are a vital part of Mississippi's agriculture industry, accounting for more than \$197 million impact in 2024,” said Commissioner Gipson. “Through this grant program, our state will be able to continue to research, promote and further enhance the state's specialty crop industry.”

Ten projects will be implemented through the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program:

- Alcorn State University will train small scale farmers and woodland owners in Mississippi to utilize conifer wood waste for cultivating oyster mushrooms through hands-on workshops.
- Mississippi State University will conduct research to:
 - Investigate the optimal time of day based on climate and soil conditions for transplanting sweet potato slips and determine if transplant water influences sweet potato slip survivability and root initiation.
 - Enhance the competitiveness of Mississippi-grown leafy green specialty crops by optimizing hydroponic production and identifying the most effective hydroponic systems; customize nutrient solutions to maximize nutritional value; and develop cost-efficient temperature management strategies to improve yield and crop quality.

- Investigate the feasibility of producing disease-free strawberry plugs by investigating strawberry propagation ratio or efficacy of major cultivars as affected by environmental factors.
- Assess the feasibility of growing kiwifruit as a high-value alternative crop in Mississippi.
- Investigate best management practices in sweetcorn production to meet critical needs in knowledge gaps among commercial sweetcorn growers in Mississippi.
- Enhance watermelon production through improved plant health management by evaluating a range of fungicides, insecticides and herbicides in watermelon fields under Mississippi growing conditions.
- Identify and develop superior tea cultivars adapted to the state's unique climate through a combined genotypic and phenotypic approach.
- The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce will:
 - Provide financial and educational assistance for growers obtaining Good Agricultural Practices/Good Handling Practices food safety certification.
 - Expand its Freshly Picked educational program to further increase education, awareness and value of Mississippi grown specialty crops by highlighting their seasonal availability, preparation methods, nutritional benefits and local accessibility.

For more information on the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, visit www.mdac.ms.gov and follow the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce on Facebook, Instagram and X.

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