

# **MISSISSIPPI SPECIALTY CROPS TASK FORCE**

## **MISSISSIPPI SPECIALTY CROPS: OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIC ACTIONS**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, developed by a task force representing diverse stakeholders across Mississippi, identifies specialty crops with significant growth potential, including sweet potatoes, blueberries, pecans, emerging niche crops, and local foods. It also identifies challenges, opportunities, and key strategic actions to strengthen the industry.

Mississippi has a longstanding tradition in row crops and grain production, but to achieve sustainable growth in the specialty crops sector, a paradigm shift is required. It is imperative that the state and its universities allocate resources and institutional support to specialty crops at a level commensurate with those provided to commodity crops. Emerging federal trade policies, including new tariffs on imports, present a timely opportunity to boost domestic production. Additionally, the new administration's focus on healthy eating through the "Make America Healthy Again" initiative offers a unique opening to position specialty crops as central to both economic and public health agendas. For Mississippi to capitalize on these trends, a strategic plan and coordinated efforts among stakeholders, government agencies, universities, and the private sector are essential.

Specialty crop farms, often smaller in scale, predominantly rely on local markets such as farmers markets. However, Mississippi's small population and socio-economic conditions limit the growth potential of these outlets. While local farmers markets are vital entry points for small producers and should receive strong support, broader market opportunities must be developed to sustain and grow medium- and large-scale operations. This includes identifying and pursuing new sales channels for fresh and value-added products both within Mississippi and in regional or national markets.

Key actions must include:

- 1. Infrastructure and valued-added processing capacity:** Mississippi must prioritize investment in infrastructure and processing capacity to strengthen the specialty crop value chain. Critical needs include foundational infrastructure for handling, packaging, cold storage, and transportation to preserve product quality and expand market access. Facilities for value-added processing are key to boosting economic development and reducing market leakage by keeping more processing within the state. In the short term, shared-use infrastructure like certified kitchens and co-packing facilities can provide immediate support for small and mid-sized producers. Long term efforts should focus on attracting large-scale processors and developing statewide infrastructure to support industrial growth. These efforts can be accelerated through targeted programs, including incentives, tax breaks, and public-private partnerships. Importantly, agricultural infrastructure development should be integrated into broader economic development strategies, recognizing that investments in industrial infrastructure can serve both manufacturing and agriculture-based industries.
- 2. Innovation and technology adoption:** To remain competitive in quality-driven markets, Mississippi growers must adopt improved cultivars and advanced technologies. The state should support programs that reduce financial risk—such as providing seeds or plants for on-farm trials and offering cost-share incentives—to help producers test and adopt innovations without incurring high upfront costs.
- 3. Market access expansion and innovation:** Efforts should focus on connecting farmers to new markets, including food service providers, restaurants, and wholesalers. Promoting local procurement programs within schools and state institutions will support producers while fostering healthier diets for residents.

4. **Industry coordination and collaboration:** Support for grower collaboration is essential to help small producers access larger markets. This includes funding for joint marketing efforts, trade show participation, and the establishment of grower associations and cooperatives. In addition, stronger collaboration and administrative commitment at state universities are needed to ensure consistent, statewide support for producers.
5. **Workforce development and labor-saving solutions:** Given the labor-intensive nature of specialty crop farming, the state must implement robust labor development programs. Strategies can include both support for H-2A participation and efforts to integrate individuals with limited employment opportunities, including those in rehabilitation. Employer incentives, such as training assistance and tax benefits, can further support workforce expansion. At the same time, prioritize investment in labor-saving technologies to reduce reliance on manual labor and enhance efficiency.

Specifically for high-value crops, Mississippi's leadership in sweet potato production offers an opportunity to improve export quality standards and develop in-state value-added (e.g., sweet potato fries) processing. Mississippi's established *rabbiteye* blueberry plantings position it to capitalize on high-quality frozen and value-added products, while supporting the adoption of new cultivars. Likewise, the pecan industry can expand through plantings of new cultivars to capture domestic share, while enhancing processing capacity (e.g., nut butters, flour) to align with new market trends and consumer preferences.

By strategically investing in infrastructure, new cultivars, expanding controlled environment agriculture (CEA), and addressing labor challenges and farmer coordination, Mississippi can grow its specialty crops industry.

#### **Recommended Bold Moves:**

##### *Mississippi State University:*

1. MSU should lead the creation of a coordinated research and extension cluster focused on specialty crops, bringing together growers, agencies, and industry partners to align research with industry needs, co-develop practical solutions, and implement high-impact projects statewide.

##### *State of Mississippi:*

2. The state should fund research, pilot programs, and technology development in automation, robotics, and AI tailored to specialty crops and Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA). Early farmer engagement and partnerships with innovative organizations like AgLaunch will be essential to ensure practical, market-ready solutions. Pilot and demonstration programs should be prioritized to allow producers to test technologies firsthand.
3. The state should invest in shared-use kitchens, co-packing facilities, and regional cold storage hubs to strengthen the food supply chain for small and mid-sized producers. Establishing a Food Industry Corridor in North Mississippi would enhance processing capacity and leverage the proximity to the Memphis market for regional distribution.
4. The state should launch initiatives that support food entrepreneurship, student-led innovation, and targeted industry development. A food innovation hub, that could be hosted at MSU, could provide training, technical support, and incubation services to help entrepreneurs bring new value-added products to market.

# GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES AND PRIORITIES ACTIONS FOR THE SPECIALTY CROP INDUSTRY IN MISSISSIPPI

This report identifies the specialty crops and supply chain opportunities with the greatest potential to significantly enhance the economic impact of Mississippi's specialty crop sector. Developed by a task force consisting of Mississippi State University faculty, a representative from the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, and a producer, this report also incorporates input from a wide range of stakeholders, including state government officials, MSU faculty, farmers, and agricultural organizations.

Mississippi holds key competitive advantages, including water resources, strategic location, and lower production costs compared to other states, all of which can support its emergence as a strong specialty crop and value-added products producer. However, growing Mississippi's specialty crop industry will require intentional state support, similar to that provided to other industries. While the current sector is relatively small, if Mississippi aims to become a major specialty crop producer, increased institutional investment and funding will be crucial. Although market and policy uncertainty persist, specialty crops align closely with national priorities to enhance food security and improve public health. Emerging trade policies, such as new tariffs on imports, present an opportunity to boost domestic production. Additionally, initiatives like "Make America Healthy Again," position specialty crops at the intersection of economic development and health promotion.

This report addresses major challenges facing the industry and outlines strategies to overcome them. It highlights both short- and long-term priorities, initially focusing on strengthening the sector broadly before identifying high-potential crops (sweet potatoes, blueberries, and pecans) as well as opportunities in both traditional and niche markets. The report concludes with targeted policy recommendations to drive industry growth.

The following section outlines the five key needs the industry must address, highlighting associated challenges, opportunities, and priority actions to drive growth.

## 1. Increasing Infrastructure and Value-added Processing Capacity

### *Challenges and opportunities:*

Mississippi's specialty crop industry can expand beyond fresh-market sales by increasing processing capacity for frozen and value-added products to capture more economic value in-state. Currently, much of the value-added processing occurs outside the state—resulting in lost revenue, jobs, and tax opportunities. A major barrier is the lack of foundational infrastructure, such as cold storage, transportation, utilities, and logistics systems, which limits the state's ability to attract investment from new and existing large-scale food companies. Prioritizing public and private investment and partnerships to improve infrastructure is critical.

### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **Increase shared infrastructure capacity:** Establish grants or cost-share programs to develop cold storage and distribution facilities, certified shared-use kitchen spaces equipped for commercial production and available for rent by entrepreneurs, and co-packing facilities that serve small and mid-sized producers.

- *For example, investment in an MSU innovation hub to offer co-packing services—including processing, product testing, and labeling—would provide key technical support to entrepreneurs but will require additional personnel and funding.*

#### *Long term priority actions:*

- **Attract large-scale food processors:** Remove barriers and offer incentives, such as tax breaks and public-private partnerships, to recruit established food companies. Pair this with statewide investments in roads, utilities, broadband, and water access. Integrating agricultural infrastructure into broader economic development strategies can drive cross-sector growth, as investments in roads, utilities, and logistics support both agriculture and manufacturing, while agriculture, in particular, offers strong potential for job creation across rural communities.
- **Develop food industry corridor:** Support the creation of a food industry corridor in Desoto, Tate, and Marshall Counties, leveraging existing infrastructure and the proximity to Memphis to enhance regional distribution and collaboration.

## 2. Fostering Innovation and Technology Adoption

#### *Challenges and opportunities:*

To position Mississippi's specialty crop sector for sustained growth, the state must take decisive action to improve production efficiency. Growers must adopt new cultivars and advanced technologies to remain competitive in increasingly quality-driven markets. Although automation is transforming agriculture, specialty crops often lag behind due to the sector's smaller size. If the U.S. aims to expand specialty crop production, significant investment in automation and technology for this sector is essential. Funding should prioritize research grants and technical assistance to accelerate the adoption and scaling of controlled environment agriculture (CEA) technologies and automation—both of which protect crops from weather extremes, extend growing seasons, and reduce labor dependence. While some research efforts are underway at institutions like Mississippi State University, current capacity and resources remain limited compared to larger states. Strategic focus areas include:

- Adoption of new cultivars with strong agronomic and market performance.
- Expansion of controlled environment agriculture (CEA) technologies.
- Automation of farm activities (e.g., harvesting) to address ongoing labor shortages.

#### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **New cultivar and technology adoption:** Launch programs that reduce producer financial risk, such as supplying seeds or plants for on-farm trials and offering cost-share incentives for adopting new cultivars and technologies.
- **Accelerate high tunnel adoption:** Provide targeted financial assistance and technical support to rapidly expand high tunnel use as a cost-effective entry point into CEA.
- **Expand research and technical assistance:** Increase funding for research on new cultivars and technologies suited to Mississippi's climate and offer hands-on training programs to equip producers with skills to manage CEA systems and adopt advanced technologies.

#### *Long term priority actions:*

- **Drive automation innovation:** Establish research and development grants and seed funding to advance robotics, AI, and automated systems tailored to specialty crops. Foster public-private

partnerships and prioritize early and continuous farmer engagement in the development, testing and refinement of new technology. Support demonstration projects and on-farm pilot programs to allow producers to see technologies in action and understand their applicability.

- ▶ *Programs such as AgLaunch could serve as key partners to support innovation and farmer-centered technology development.*
- **Invest in Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA):** California's ongoing water shortages create an opportunity for Mississippi to expand CEA production of high-value crops such as leafy greens (lettuce, spinach, mustard, collards, Swiss chard). The state should establish grant and incentive programs to drive CEA adoption and attract private and public investment. Building regional CEA hubs will be critical to support industry growth. Incentives should prioritize energy-efficient systems and sustainable practices, positioning Mississippi as a leader in advanced specialty crop production.
  - ▶ *A model similar to Kentucky's transition from tobacco to high-value and CEA crop production could guide Mississippi's strategy, leveraging research and development grants to drive public-private investment.*

### 3. Expanding Market Access and Innovation in Fresh and Value-Added Products

#### *Challenges and opportunities:*

Local food systems strengthen both the local economy and resilience of the food supply chain. Direct-to-consumer and local outlets—such as farmers' markets, farm stands, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and agritourism ventures—provide small, mid-sized, and beginning farmers with entry points to generate income, build business capacity, and promote consumer engagement. Although local demand is constrained by Mississippi's relatively sparse population, farmers' markets serve as important incubators for testing new products, particularly value-added items. Expanding these local opportunities can help reduce growers' reliance on out-of-state farmers markets. However, given the limited potential of the local market, Mississippi must also aggressively pursue regional and national market opportunities to achieve meaningful industry growth.

#### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **Enhance statewide branding and consumer demand:** Partner with MDAC and increase funding to launch an aggressive branding and media campaign—leveraging platforms like YouTube and social media—to promote Mississippi-grown specialty crops, farmers' markets, and CSA programs, boosting awareness, participation, and local food sales.
- **Increase support for farmers markets:** Secure funding for infrastructure improvements and encourage local city governments to support their markets by facilitating locations with convenient access, visibility, and adequate parking to attract more patrons and vendors. Strengthen the sustainability of farmers markets by expanding volunteer-based support programs, including partnerships with youth service organizations like 4-H.
- **Expand access for low-income consumers:** Grow programs like SNAP acceptance at farmers' markets and expand initiatives like Double Up Food Bucks to increase affordability of local produce.



- **Connect producers with buyers:** Organize vendor-buyer networking events to connect farmers with local and regional grocery stores, restaurants, and food hubs.
- **Explore new domestic and export markets:**
  - Focus on expanding sales into nearby cities like New Orleans, Memphis, Houston, and Atlanta. Support efforts to bring buyers to Mississippi to engage directly with producers and explore sourcing opportunities.
  - Enhance trade expertise through state organizations like the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC), Mississippi State University (MSU), and the Southern United States Trade Association (SUSTA). Support participation in key trade shows, such as the International Fresh Produce Association Global Produce and Floral Show and the American Frozen Food Institute Annual Conference, for farmers to gain market insights.
  - Increase efforts to connect farmers with funding opportunities from organizations like SUSTA and the Small Business Administration to facilitate market expansion.

#### *Long-term priority actions:*

- **Promote local procurement:** Develop supply chain networks connecting local farmers to grocery stores, supermarkets, restaurants, and institutional buyers. Encourage local governments and institutions (e.g., schools and hospitals) to adopt procurement policies that require a percentage of locally grown produce.
- **Cultivate innovation in value-added product development:** Launch programs that encourage students and entrepreneurs to develop value-added businesses, fostering innovation in food preservation and product development.
  - ▶ *Programs like Colorado's [Getting Your Recipe to Market](#) 12-week training program could help entrepreneur launch new products to market.*
  - ▶ *Consider creating state-funded initiatives to support targeted industry development, such as a "Mississippi Grape and Wine Initiative" that would establish a wine lab and teaching vineyard to drive research, extension, and serve as a business incubator.*

## 4. Strengthening Industry Coordination and Collaboration

#### *Challenges and opportunities:*

A more coordinated approach between researchers, educators, government, and industry stakeholders is essential to drive innovation and support specialty crop production in Mississippi. Currently, research and extension efforts lack coordination, and several key positions have either been lost or remain unfilled, leading to a loss of institutional knowledge and programming momentum. In addition, the specialty crop industry has historically provided limited financial support for research and extension efforts, making it difficult to leverage matching funds for larger projects. At the same time, the absence of strong administrative and technical support has limited the ability to manage large-scale research and outreach initiatives. The small size of the industry compared to other sectors creates a challenging cycle: limited industry size leads to limited support, but achieving growth will require expanded investment in people and programs. On the producer side, the lack of statewide collaboration is a major barrier. Mississippi lacks a unified fruit and vegetable organization to set priorities, advocate for resources, and drive collective action.

#### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **Organize collaborative teams:** Establish cross-institutional teams across Mississippi universities, MDAC, and other agencies to tackle key industry challenges, with strong grower engagement. Work with industry partners to jointly develop research agendas that align with company needs and market opportunities. Further, create a coordinated research and extension specialty crop cluster within the university to strengthen collaboration and focus efforts.
- **Expand outreach and education:** Strengthen extension programs to educate farmers, consumers, and policymakers on the benefits of specialty crops, highlighting links between local produce consumption and improved health outcomes. Secure funding to expand research and extension positions dedicated to specialty crops to ensure Mississippi stays competitive in specialty crop innovation.
- **Establish grower associations:** Create statewide specialty crop producer groups to organize advocacy efforts, secure funding, and strengthen producer representation.

#### *Long term priority actions:*

- **Enhance farmer collaboration and foster resource-sharing initiatives:** Promote cooperative models where growers jointly invest in infrastructure, marketing strategies, and bulk purchasing to reduce costs and increase efficiency.
  - ▶ *Examples include Kentucky's produce auctions and their collaborative purchasing systems for packaging materials which could serve as models for Mississippi. This could also be achieved through more formal cooperative structures.*

## **5. Workforce Development and Labor-saving Solutions**

#### *Challenges and opportunities:*

Labor shortages pose a significant challenge for the specialty crop sector in Mississippi and the rest of the country. With Mississippi's declining rural population and the complexity of the H-2A temporary foreign worker program, urgent action is needed to build a skilled agricultural workforce and advance mechanization to reduce labor dependence. In addition, any initiative that would reduce labor costs or improve access to a reliable workforce would provide immediate relief.

#### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **Facilitate farmers' access to H-2A workers:** Expand training programs and legal resources to help farmers navigate the H-2A program.

#### *Long term priority actions:*

- **Establish agricultural workforce pipelines:** Expand vocational training programs to equip workers with essential agricultural skills, ensuring a steady pipeline of skilled labor. Develop state-supported reentry programs to integrate individuals with low opportunities into the agricultural workforce by providing skill certification and employer incentives such as training assistance, tax credits, and wage subsidies.
- **Expand mechanization and technology adoption:** Prioritize investment in labor-saving technologies, including robotics, precision agriculture, and artificial intelligence, to reduce reliance on manual labor and enhance efficiency.



## ❖ Opportunities and Priority Actions for High-Potential Crops

### Sweet Potatoes

Mississippi has a comparative advantage in sweet potato production, ranking as the third-largest producer nationally. The industry benefits from established generational farms equipped with specialized machinery. Its long-term viability is bolstered by relatively low import competition; in 2023, only 6% of sweet potatoes in the market were imported, compared to 69% for tomatoes and 35% for fresh vegetables (USDA ERS, 2024). Moreover, sweet potato consumption shows a general growth trend.

#### *Opportunities*

- **Production and market expansion:** Producers can scale operations and reach new markets by focusing on:
  - *Accessing export markets:* Adapting production, harvest, and packaging to meet international standards could open profitable markets in Asia and Europe.
  - *Increasing value-added processing:* Mississippi has the potential to capture approximately \$4 million<sup>1</sup> annually by bringing value-added processing currently outsourced to other states. Expanding local processing capacity would retain more economic value within the state.
    - ▶ *An example of a imported product from China that could be produced locally is [Costco Sweetpotato Snack Sticks](#).*

#### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **Explore new domestic and export markets:** Actively support and encourage growers to participate in trade shows to gain market insights regarding product standards for various markets. Enhance trade expertise of sweet potato growers and Sweet Potato Council.

#### *Long term priority actions:*

- **Promote cultivar diversity:** Support the adoption of new sweet potato varieties, such as antioxidant-rich purple sweet potatoes, to diversify product offering and tap into new market segments.
- **Invest in processing infrastructure:** Expand facilities for handling and packaging for the fresh market, and processing sweet potatoes into value-added products such as frozen products, flakes, flours, and health-focused alternatives, including high-fiber and vitamin-rich options that serve as alternatives to traditional potatoes.

### Pecans

Mississippi is the 11th largest pecan producer in the U.S., with acreage increasing by 20% between the 2017 and 2022 Censuses of Agriculture. This crop offers strong growth potential due to its high level of mechanization, reducing its reliance on labor—a key advantage given the labor shortages facing the industry. Demand for pecans is rising, with per capita availability increasing by 43% over the past decade, from 0.43 pounds per person in 2013 to 0.61 pounds in 2023 (USDA ERS, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is based on the top two processors transporting 600,000 cwt of Mississippi sweet potatoes annually, with transportation costs adjusted by 25% to include additional processing volume. Costs for potatoes used in baby food production are excluded.

### *Opportunities*

- **Production expansion:** Mississippi can increase its share of the domestic pecan market by expanding production and introducing high-performing new cultivars. Establishing new orchards, rather than renovating old ones, offers a better cost-benefit ratio. With strategic investment in infrastructure and research, the state can position itself as a top pecan producer within six to ten years.
- **Market expansion:**
  - ▶ *Value-added products:* Capitalize on consumer demand for health-focused, specialty nut products by expanding production of nut oils, butters, gluten-free flours, and snack bars.
  - ▶ *Export markets:* Mississippi can tap into export opportunities, building on the U.S. trend of exporting 45% of pecan production.

### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **Accelerate the adoption of yield-enhancing technologies:** Promote and incentivize the use of irrigation technologies to enhance yields and improve nut quality.

### *Long term priority actions:*

- **Expand research on new cultivars and best practices:** Conduct field trials to evaluate the performance of new cultivars, providing producers with data-driven recommendations for transitioning from old orchards to higher-yielding, resistant varieties.
- **Invest in processing infrastructure:**
  - ▶ Increase in-state shelling capacity to reduce reliance on out-of-state processors. This will lower costs for growers and make it more economically viable to bring dormant orchards back into production.
  - ▶ Build infrastructure (including shared processing capacity) for value-added products, including pecan oil, butter, and flour, to enhance market potential and generate diversified revenue streams.

## **Blueberries**

Mississippi's blueberry industry, despite declining acreage, has significant growth potential with the right support and adaptation to evolving market conditions. The state's favorable growing climate and unique harvest window (between Florida's season and the Northeast's) offer a competitive advantage. Growers can capitalize on the rising demand for blueberries, with U.S. per capita consumption more than doubling from 1.12 pounds in 2012 to 2.77 pounds in 2022 (USDA ERS, 2023).

### *Opportunities*

- **Strengthen the market for native *rabbiteye* blueberries and promote sustainable production:** Assist producers in delivering high-quality fresh, frozen, and value-added products made from existing *rabbiteye* plantings, with a focus on in-state, local, and regional markets. Promote sustainable practices suited to native varieties and explore organic or low-input systems. Conduct consumer research to assess preferences for *rabbiteye* versus Southern

Highbush (SHB) cultivars and use findings to inform producers and buyers about *rabbiteye*'s market potential and counter existing reputation among distributors and buyers.

- **Production and market diversification:** To diversify production and enhance domestic competitiveness, encourage new plantings of early ripening SHB cultivars and high tunnel production to extend the growing season. These strategies leverage Mississippi's unique harvest window to secure higher prices during periods of reduced market supply. Strategic investments in infrastructure and mechanization will be essential to mitigate risks in an increasingly competitive blueberry industry.
- **Value-added products and shared processing facilities:** Expand opportunities in the frozen berry market by increasing Individual Quick Freezing (IQF) capacity to meet the rising demand for high-quality frozen berries. Explore additional value-added products such as juices, wine blends, pet food, and ice cream—particularly as alternative uses for blueberries that do not meet fresh market standards due to imperfections.

#### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **Promote technology adoption:** Expand access to high tunnel technology to lengthen the growing season, reduce pest and weather risks, and improve berry quality through controlled irrigation and fertilization.
- **Expand market access and product aggregation:** Assist producers in identifying and coordinating market opportunities, including larger regional buyers. Promote sustainably grown native varieties, drawing from the "wild" blueberry branding used in the Northwest. Promote local consumption through initiatives like farm-to-school programs, integrating blueberries into lunchrooms and focusing on frozen products to match the harvest window.
- **Strengthen industry leadership and coordination:** Support state blueberry grower organizations in developing unified strategies and efforts for production, marketing, and advocacy.

#### *Long term priority actions:*

- **Invest in research of new cultivars:**
  - ▶ Identify cultivars adapted to Mississippi's climate with extended shelf life and early ripening traits. Research should also address freeze damage mitigation strategies through partnerships with university breeding programs.
  - ▶ Develop a state-incentive program to encourage farmers to test and adopt new high-performing cultivars that align with commercial market demands.
- **Expand processing and cold storage infrastructure:** Develop regional cold storage hubs and shared processing spaces to enhance post-harvest capabilities, including sorting, packaging, and freezing, ensuring producers can maintain quality and reach broader markets.

### **Traditional and new crops**

Mississippi has an opportunity to enhance the production of traditional crops while also expanding into high-value and specialty crops that align with emerging market trends. With strategic investments in new cultivars, market development, controlled environment agriculture (CEA), and branding, the state can position itself as a key player in both established and niche agricultural markets.

### *Short-term priority actions:*

- **Enhancing traditional crops:** Mississippi's staple crops can benefit from improved production methods, disease-resistant cultivars, and advanced technologies to increase yields, quality, and marketability.
  - ▶ *Cucurbits (winter and summer squashes):* Support the adoption of diverse cultivars suited for commercial domestic markets to target various market windows, expanding beyond local sales.
  - ▶ *Watermelons:* Increase marketing efforts to differentiate Mississippi-grown watermelons in regional markets.
  - ▶ *Peppers and fresh market tomatoes:* Expand the use of disease-resistant cultivars to improve resilience and maintain quality consistent with competitive markets.
- **Expanding ornamentals and cut flowers:** Mississippi's climate supports year-round ornamentals and cut-flower production, with strong potential for local and national markets.
  - ▶ Improve post-harvest handling practices to extend shelf-life and expand wholesale and retail market opportunities.
  - ▶ Expand cut flower production for local markets, including sunflowers, zinnias, snapdragons, celosia, gomphrena, crape myrtle, and hydrangeas.

### *Long-term priority actions:*

- **Expanding production of high-value and -demand crops:** Blackberries and historical crops like muscadines have strong consumer demand, but targeted market development is needed to support growers.
  - ▶ *Improved cultivars:* Invest in breeding and research focusing on flavor, shelf life, and quality fruit to boost competitiveness.
  - ▶ *Regional branding:* Establish a Mississippi-branded marketing campaign, similar to "Georgia Peaches," to increase consumer recognition and demand for local muscadines and other specialty crops.
- **Developing high-value niche specialty crops:** Mississippi's climate supports innovative crops with growing market potential. Promising crops include elderberries, mayhaws, pawpaws, Japanese persimmons, tea, yaupon holly (for tea), and passion fruit hybrids like maypops. Strategic investment in production research and market analysis will be key to scaling up these opportunities.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

To ensure the long-term growth and competitiveness of Mississippi's specialty crop industry, targeted policy interventions are necessary. The task force has identified the following key recommendations to expand research, enhance infrastructure, and attract investment in value-added processing:

- **Expand research and innovation:** Increase funding for research to identify high-yielding, disease-resistant cultivars suited to Mississippi's climate. Prioritize research on mechanization, automation, and precision agriculture to enhance production efficiency and address labor shortages.

- **Accelerate adoption of new cultivars and technologies:** Reduce financial and technical barriers to innovation by providing incentives for farmers to test and integrate improved cultivars and labor-saving technologies, including robotics and precision agriculture.
- **Facilitate industry participation in trade shows:** Provide financial assistance and logistical support for specialty crop growers to attend national and regional trade shows, ensuring access to broader markets.
- **Support grower collaboration and industry advocacy:** Foster the formation of grower associations to drive collective industry priorities, secure funding, and enhance market opportunities.
- **Develop state-level workforce integration programs:** Implement initiatives to train and integrate individuals into the agricultural workforce, addressing local labor shortages.
- **Advocate for improved H-2A access:** Advocate for national policy changes to streamline the H-2A visa process, making it more efficient and less burdensome for farmers.
- **Expand farm-to-school and local procurement programs:** Increase funding for farm-to-school initiatives, school tasting events, and local procurement programs to boost exposure to Mississippi-grown produce.
- **Fuel marketing efforts:** Increase funding for the Genuine MS brand to strengthen promotional campaigns and drive consumer demand for Mississippi-grown specialty crops.
- **Strengthen food affordability programs:** Enhance support for SNAP acceptance and incentive programs, making locally grown fruits and vegetables more accessible to low-income consumers while expanding market opportunities for farmers.
- **Expand funding for value-added capacity:** Increase funds allocated to loans and grant programs— such as the Mississippi Land, Water, and Timber Resources Program — to expand cold storage, packaging, and processing capacity, strengthening the specialty crop value chain.
- **Promote specialty crop processing hubs:** Support the development of shared processing facilities to lower entry costs for small and medium scale producers, enabling them to diversify products.
- **Attract industry investment:** Implement targeted incentives, including tax breaks and grants, to attract food processing companies and supply chain infrastructure investments to Mississippi.

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