Many crop producers in northwest Florida are considering a movement toward alternative agricultural enterprises. Farmers are now seeking more profitable returns from their land as low commodity prices and rising production costs continue to reduce profit margins for agronomic crops in particular.

The production and marketing of the alternative crops offers many possibilities. These potentially high return crops generally require much less acreage and there is generally less competition when marketed at a local or regional level. However, alternative crop production is usually highly specialized, requires more inputs per acre and tests the marketing skills of those establishing or transitioning to such an operation.

A recent study tour provided an opportunity to obtain valuable information from those who have successfully established alternative agricultural enterprises. It was made possible by a 6 month IFAS Extension professional development leave. The tour began in early June, 2006 and ended the following December.

The study tour was designed to obtain production and marketing information from alternative agricultural businesses and associated university-based researchers and specialists. A total of 99 sites were visited in 14 southern and eastern states as well as two Canadian provinces. Establishments visited included vegetable and fruit producers, nurseries, garden centers, agri-tourism, value added, roadside markets, horticultural suppliers, research centers, cut flowers and community supported agriculture.
During each tour stop a discussion was held with the owner or manager of the establishment. A list of questions and points for discussion was prepared before each stop in order to obtain as much specific information as possible. Over 12,000 miles were traveled in order to reach the desired locations. Information was documented through 60 typed pages of notes and 1,050 photographs.

Conclusions:

Successful alternative agricultural enterprises exist in all areas that were visited, though not uniformly distributed, even within a particular state. Several definite “hot spots” were discovered, where a wide range of specialty items are being produced and marketed. Most interesting were those characteristics that successful alternative/specialty operations have in common (see below).

Successful Alternative or Specialty Enterprises

Things in Commons

■ Tend to think like customers, not like farmers.

■ Good to excellent marketers

■ Provide a unique product or experience

■ Set goals and have a plan. Some are visionary.

■ Good people and money managers

■ They network, cooperate and collaborate

■ Providing unique products or experiences, they are “price makers”, not price takers.