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Illinois Department of Agriculture Awards Specialty Crop Grant Funds

SPRINGFIELD, IL – The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) received more than \$591,000 through the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. Producer groups, trade associations, nonprofits and colleges and universities were eligible to apply for grant funds through the department.

IDOA will split the funds between ten projects that are intended to expand the availability of fresh, locally grown produce and strengthen the state’s specialty crop industry.

“Illinois may be best known for corn and soybeans, but we are a nationwide leader in specialty crops as well,” said Jerry Costello II, IDOA Acting Director. “These funds will help expand markets for our specialty growers, allowing them to maintain a viable industry.”

The state devotes more than 100,000 acres of farmland for growing specialty crops, which produce nearly \$393 million in sales for Illinois farmers. Illinois is the number one producer of pumpkins and horseradish and ranks among the top ten for production of lima beans, asparagus, cauliflower and green peas.

The 2020 Specialty Crop Block Grant recipients are as follows:

- The Experimental Station to further expand the 61st Street Farmers Market’s educational programming and partnership with Carnegie Elementary School and Jackson Park Terrace to rebuild local knowledge of the nutritional benefits and pleasure of consuming fresh and healthy foods, and knowledge of how to grow and prepare them.
- The Land Connection to increase knowledge and consumption of Illinois specialty crops by engaging consumers with woody perennials, a less readily available specialty crop, and home production.
- Advocates for Urban Agriculture to expand the Good Practices for Growing in Chicago program and provide increased technical assistance designed to support Chicagoland farmers in implementing good agricultural practices (GAP) that foster more sustainable business development for urban farm specialty crop producers.

- Southern Illinois University to minimize risk of microbial pathogens in fresh strawberries by developing a predictive model for microbial growth in different stages of strawberry production, handling, treatment, storage, transportation, retail sale and consumption.
- IAA Foundation Illinois and Ag in the Classroom to raise awareness and further education on specialty crops as an effective way to engage young consumers in understanding the importance of agriculture, and leading them to healthy food choices, like eating more fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Freeport High School to facilitate a student garden, greenhouse, and orchard and run a specialty crop business producing and selling over 50 different varieties of vegetables, herbs, and fruits. Over 100 students are involved with the project through the summer work training program.
- Southern Illinois University to determine the suitability and economic value for producing organic specialty butterhead lettuce in high tunnels for early spring Illinois markets to improve consumer access to high quality locally produced foods at a time when local foods are lacking in the marketplace.
- Illinois Green Industry Association to create a digital platform to serve as a tool where motivated buyers can connect with the high-quality plant material they seek, ultimately linking them to a local producer in their community where they can complete the purchase.
- Illinois Specialty Growers Association to offer educational opportunities for specialty crop farmers with educational programs at the annual Illinois Specialty Crop Conference and additional workshops and webinars throughout the 2021 year.
- Illinois Farmer's Market Association to conduct a series of regional, statewide training for new, beginning, socially disadvantaged, existing farmers, specialty crop producers, and market managers. The series will focus on professional development and training in post-pandemic producer-to-consumer local food systems.

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