Specialty Crop Block Grant Program at the WFREC Jay Research Center

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The large number of specialty farms in the area has created a problem that most people would envy. Traditional farms are diversifying their operations to include fresh produce that can be sold straight off the farm or through local retail markets. The strong demand for demonstrations and consultations from local producers led the group to apply for and receive a Florida Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Block Grant. The grant has allowed the group to begin working on several different projects. First, several greenhouses and small plots at the Jay Research Center have been turned into four demonstrations on different cropping systems. Each plot is designed to extend the growing season of peppers and tomatoes. Second, the group is working with Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association to help recruit farmers and expand the number of retail outlets accepting local produce in the area. Third, the need for food safety and understanding of government regulations has meant several agents have attended training sessions to teach directly to clientele. One of the first large activities of the grant was a field day at the demonstration plots and walking clients through the positives and negatives of each growing system. The grant is spread over a two year period and will allow the group to provide a small grant program, field days, and additional training for local farmers.