

## Specialty crop growers boost rural economy

By Jim Nowlan

Rural Illinois is hurting. Rural and small town Illinois lost 12 percent of its population of persons under age 44 in the decade 2000-2010, according to the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs!

Neighboring state rural populations declined as well, but only by half as much as in Illinois. No one seems to know why Illinois' rural population fell by so much, but I am guessing one reason is that our big flat-land farm operations grew significantly in size, as 24-row corn planters reduced the need for farmers.

I visited recently with Lyndon and Kimberley Hartz of Wyoming, IL about their 10-acre, intensively farmed specialty crop operation, which supports them and pays for five full-time employees in the summer.

Is this rapidly growing, yet still relatively tiny, sector of "local food movement," specialty crop production a game changer for rural Illinois?

Probably not. But it is fun to dream.

Hartz Produce has been in operation for 10 years. Sensing there were no jobs in his college major of parks and recreation, Lyndon began researching small farming as he wrapped up his college degree. He bought 10 acres from a willing farm owner and was off and planting.

The young couple recently added plastic-covered hoop houses to their operation. Thus Hartz Produce can generate crops year round in the earth, heated solely by the sun, using organic fertilizers and insecticides,

Hartz Produce grows at least 60 different varieties of crops, including five types of cauliflower and four of cabbage. Especially popular with the high-end restaurants they serve in Peoria are tomatillos (green in the husk, miniature tomatoes good in salsa), white mulberries (for their apparent fat-blocking characteristics) and red raspberries.

Hartz Produce also does the basics—big tomatoes (available in June and throughout the summer), sweet corn, spinach, lettuce, kale, potatoes, carrots, onions.

In addition to restaurant sales, Hartz Produce does a big share of its business with direct-to-customer sales of weekly boxes of vegetables, fruits and herbs, available for pickup at various locations in central Illinois and marketed through the Good Earth Food Alliance. The other half of Hartz' sales are done at farmers' markets in central Illinois.

The local food movement has been growing rapidly. According to Diane Handley, manager of the Illinois Specialty Growers Association, the number of farmers' markets in the state has grown from 60 to nearly 400 since 1996.

“There are more even communities wanting these markets, but not enough specialty crop farmers to meet the demand,” says Handley.

“Ten years ago, we had 150 participants at our annual conference,” adds Handley, “and this year we had 650.”

Rare is the person with the capital to buy 1,000 acres to start up a corn and beans operation that will generate roughly \$1,000 per acre in sales.

But entry is practicable for the small farmer, who can finance 10-15 acres at \$10,000-15,000 per acre with as little as \$20,000 in capital for machinery, according to Lyndon Hartz. And this investment can generate \$10,000-15,000 per acre in revenue from vegetable and fruit crops.

“I have a brother,” notes Diane Handley, “who farms 500 acres. Several years ago he put in 12 acres of pumpkins and, before corn and bean prices shot up, the 12 acres were more profitable than the other 488 acres.

Still, there are challenges to specialty crop farming.

The work is labor intensive. Many days, Lyndon and Kimberley will be out in the fields or in the hoop houses from 8 a.m. until 9 at night, and then maybe have to get up at 4 a.m. to go to a farmers’ market.

Many young people with a love of the land are looking at specialty crop farming. There are now several such farms in my small Stark County.

Maybe someday rural Illinois will be heavily dotted with small farmers who can generate 10 times per acre in revenue what the corn and bean farmers can. And maybe that will help keep the lights on in some struggling rural small towns.