Center for Agroforestry
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Scaling-up elderberry production for ecological and economic benefits

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Introduction

American elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* subsp. *canadensis*) is an emerging crop that is suitable for agroforestry systems. It's immune-boosting health benefits and ability to be profitable on a small number of acres makes it a crop that is growing in popularity among small-scale farms. Additionally, farmers also value the ecological benefits, including streambank stabilization and building soil health. Identifying factors that influence growers' production and enterprise management decisions provide guidance on how to work towards achieving these benefits.

The purpose of the study is to identify pathways growers use to enter elderberry production and support enterprise development by exploring the 1) motivations and values of elderberry growers 2) resources they use to enter production 3) barriers they encounter and 4) the networks and relations that compose and structure the emerging field of elderberry production as a commercial crop.

Methods

Study design was informed by sustainable livelihoods framework and concepts in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social transformation. The researcher collected data using semi-structured interviews with 16 elderberry growers from 15 farms in Missouri during the Spring of 2023. Criteria for participation in the study included growers who 1) were at least 18 years old 2) currently grow American elderberry (Sambucus nigra subsp. canadensis) on properties they own or lease in Missouri and 3) either sell fresh/frozen elderberries and/or value-added elderberry products. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Dual coders used NVivo 14.23.1 to code transcripts and identify themes related to research objectives.

Results

Elderberry production is an important livelihood strategy for an increasing number of growers in Missouri. Growers are motivated by profit opportunities, protecting the health and sustainability of their land, supporting the health of their communities, and developing elderberry production as an industry. Some grower insights below:

Actually the ground that the elderberries are on was never really a crop ground. About two acres or so that I had hay cut off I'd average about one bale a year and I take $12,000 of elderberry off that same little patch.

I think food is going to become a regionally grown deal. Medicinal plant production is going to go only up. That's why we're scaling up. I see the demand coming.

I want to create a community -sufficiency, basically. Not self- sufficiency, but community -sufficiency. Like anything happens, you're still going to be able to get something I feel is necessary for people's health.

Grower age group	**N**
25-34	2
35-44	4
45-54	1
55-64	3
>65	6
Sex of grower	**N**
Male	9
Female	7

Farm operation type	**N**
Elderberry only	6
Elderberry and livestock	1
Elderberry and other crops	4
Elderberry, livestock and other crops	3
U-pick berry farm	1
Operations with agritourism	7

Growers' values and the relations they form to establish the field of elderberry production demonstrates common motivations. However, elderberry growers' farm operation types, resource capacities, relation to the land, and life cycle stages influence where they focus their capital to achieve short and long-term goals. Depending on type of farm operation and enterprise goals, growers faced various challenges including access to labor, equipment needs, market knowledge, and specific management information. Numerous growers were also interested in learning what other types of medicinal crops elderberry could be intercropped with.

Conclusions

Continued investigations into how to increase the overlap between different types of growers with the resources they need can further support the creation of an agricultural system that reflects grower values and is both profitable and sustainable for the land and communities.

NORTH CENTRAL SARE Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education

This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number 2020-38640-31522 through the North Central Region SARE program under project number GNC21-323. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.