

Missouri Economy Indicators

Specialty Crop Farming

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Specialty crops—such as fruits, nuts, berries, vegetables, potatoes, nursery and greenhouse products, and Christmas trees—are a diverse part of Missouri’s agricultural economy. In 2022, Missouri had 44,630 acres planted in specialty crops across 3,632 farms (4.1% of all MO farms). These operations generated roughly \$268.7 million in sales in 2022, a 25% increase from 2017. Nationally, as in Missouri, specialty crop-focused farms are more often operated by younger and female farmers near urban markets.

Specialty crop production is a growing part of Missouri agriculture, offering an easier entry into agriculture that typically requires less capital and land, although it often requires more labor. Yet, this sector can carry more risk as producers navigate market channels to find sources of demand that cover their production costs.

Missouri’s Specialty Crop Industry is Diverse

Missouri’s specialty crop farms range from small, direct-to-consumer operations that feature value-added production and agritourism, to large enterprises growing crops under contract for regional and national markets.

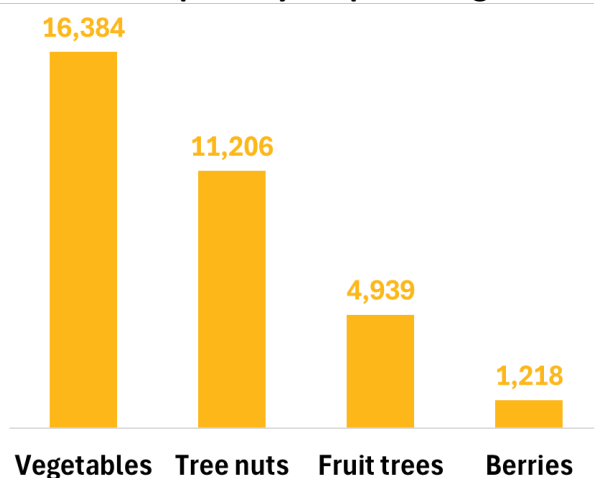
Vegetable production is the most common specialty crop, with 1,332 farms and the largest footprint (16,384 acres). Half of these acres are grown under contract with food processors.

Nursery and greenhouse production accounted for 52% of all sales in specialty crops, at \$141 million.

Tree nut orchards have been growing in Missouri, with 11,206 acres in pecans, walnuts and chestnuts—an increase of 12.8% from 2017 to 2022.

Nationally, 47% of all specialty crop acres are in California, Florida, Texas and Michigan. Missouri, by comparison, has a moderately sized specialty crop industry. Among border states, specialty crops range from 7.2% of all farms in Tennessee to 2.7% in Kansas. Neighboring states with the highest acreage totals in the region are also specialized: Nebraska is dominated by pulse crops (edible dried beans); and Oklahoma, pecans.

Missouri Specialty Crops Acreage, 2022



Specialty Crop Farms, Acres and Share, 2022

	Farms	Acres	% of Farms
Tennessee	4,533	62,370	7.2%
Kentucky	4,485	19,354	6.5%
Arkansas	1,907	33,723	5.1%
Oklahoma	3,522	153,050	5.0%
Illinois	3,245	83,693	4.6%
Missouri	3,632	44,630	4.1%
Nebraska	1,557	166,343	3.5%
Iowa	2,697	20,734	3.1%
Kansas	1,508	21,586	2.7%

Source: MU Extension graphics using data from USDA NASS, 2022 Census of Agriculture.

Missouri Specialty Crop Industry Highlights

Among its neighboring states, Missouri stands out in elderberry, grape and peach production, with the most acres in active production and bearing fruit (see table).

Vegetables: Missouri's vegetable industry includes open-field and greenhouse production systems, with vegetables grown for either fresh consumption or processing (such as canned, frozen or dried). In 2022, the state reported more than 100 acres of production in cantaloupes, cucumbers, peppers, potatoes, pumpkins, squash, sweet corn, sweet potatoes and watermelons. Potato farms dominated the state's *processing* vegetable sector, representing 84% of all such acres.

This diversity of scale and customers underscores producers' need for market information, risk management, and access to infrastructure such as refrigeration and aggregation hubs.

Fruits: The state's top fruit crops by acre include grapes (1,962), apples (1,403) and peaches (1,276). Many farms add value by processing or marketing directly through agritourism, wineries and specialty food products.

Nursery and Greenhouse: In 2022, Missouri had \$49.7 million in sales among the state's nursery crop industry and \$45.7 million in floriculture (flowering plant, cut flowers, etc.) and bedding crop sales.

Berries: Missouri's elderberry industry grew substantially between 2017 and 2022, as the number of farms doubled and acres expanded 64%. [Missouri is the leading elderberry producer in the United States](#) and elderberries represent half of the state's total berry production as strawberry and blackberry output declined.

Challenges and Opportunities

Specialty crop producers must manage risk due to weather variability, labor availability and changing consumer demand. Infrastructure gaps in cold storage, transportation and aggregation limit efforts to scale, and a lack of financing and limited specialty crop insurance options can further constrain producers. Regardless, Missouri's specialty crop industry continues to evolve, with opportunities that include increasing demand for locally grown food, year-round production using controlled environments, and growing interest in value-added enterprises. Farmers who combine innovative marketing strategies with efficient production systems are finding ways to improve their profitability and resilience.

Additional Resources

- [Missouri Ag Intel assists producers assessing local markets](#) for alternative agriculture opportunities.
- [Producers and lenders can use enterprise budgets](#) to estimate costs for starting and growing an operation.
- [Producers can receive technical help from the Missouri Agriculture, Food, and Forestry Innovation Center.](#)

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Missouri Specialty Crop Production, 2022

Operations, Acres, Rankings

Crop	Number of Operations	Acres Bearing	Rank Among Neighboring States
ELDERBERRIES	186	607	1
BLUEBERRIES	234	217	6
STRAWBERRIES	218	85	6
RASPBERRIES	90	35	5
BERRY TOTALS	742	1,218	3
PECANS	415	9,718	3
CHESTNUTS	115	391	2
HAZELNUTS	46	18	5
TREE NUT TOTALS	659	11,206	2
GRAPES	533	1,962	1
APPLES	412	1,403	3
PEACHES	422	1,276	1
FRUIT TOTALS	1,367	4,641	2

Source: MU Extension graphics using data from USDA NASS, 2022 Census of Agriculture.