Yellow-blooming canola, an oilseed crop, surrounds farmers Donald Schexnayder, left, and his father, Raymond Schexnayder, center, and LSU agronomist Steve Moore. Canola may someday become winter-season counterpart to summer-growing soybeans in Louisiana.

La. farmers experimenting with rapeseed

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

Donald Schexnayder's patch of canola in Pointe Coupee Parish is in bright yellow spring bloom.

LSU oilseed expert Steve Moore says Schexnayder's canola couldn't look much better.

But Schexnayder says he doesn't know whether he and his farming father and brothers will grow a large acreage of canola. There's more to deciding to grow the crop than just looks.

Canola is a mustard family plant called rape, which sets oil-rich seeds. Canola strains of rape are edible, other kinds of rapeseed are not.

Non-edible rapeseed oil contains high amounts of erucic acid, which is toxic to humans, and the meal of its crushed seed contains high amounts of glucosinolate, which makes it unsafe for animal feed. Non-edible rapeseed oil has industrial uses.

Moore says most canola is grown in Canada, Europe and China. About 95 percent of the canola sold in the United States is imported. It is low in saturated fat, giving it a health claim. "This is the fastest-growing crop in the world now," Moore says, referring to fastest-growing in terms of expanding acreage.

Moore's interest is to find out if canola is a worthwhile crop for Louisiana, and whether it can be produced profitably in a deep South climate. Plant breeders are concentrating on breeding varieties that will do well in the South, he says.

The Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station, research division of the LSU Agricultural Center, has planted trials in different parts of the state for three or four years.

"We haven't encouraged producers because we wanted to get an idea what it looked like," Moore says during a recent visit to Schexnayder's field. Moore gave seed to Schexnayder and another farmer last fall.

Schexnayder says he had never seen rape growing before. He sowed his small trial patch with a hand-held seeder and packed the seed into the ground with a roller. Except for one application of nitrogen, he has done nothing else to the field.

He has had no trouble with pests so far, though Moore found a plant with a stem rot disease called sclerotina. Moore says it is a common rape disease.

The best way to harvest the tiny seed and where to sell them are open questions. Whether there is a market in reach of Baton Rouge will determine the Schexnayders' canola planting in the future.

"It would be a good alternate crop since it can be grown in the fall and harvested in the spring," Raymond Schexnayder says.