Muscadine industry shaky for La. farmers, agents say

Florida parishes bureau

Although some experts believe Louisiana agriculture eventually will evolve away from grain and sugarcane to horticultural produce, they doubt muscadine grapes will lead the trend.

A muscadine juice processing company in Mississippi recently has tried to interest southeast Louisiana landowners in growing muscadine grapes, but there has been little response in the area.

Since an early September informational meeting in Tangipahoa Parish, only one person has expressed interest in growing grapes, said County Agent Clyde Thompson of Amite.

"It would be a good venture for somebody trying to get land they have available into use," Thompson said. "But a person has to be very cautious."

"It would be three or four years to your first payday, and if that place in Mississippi shut down what would you do with the grapes?"

The juice processing plant has offered a base price of $200 a ton for all the grapes a farmer grows, but that price could go up or down, said Dr. Earl Puls, horticulture specialist at the LSU Extension Service. He said an average yield would be around 10 tons an acre.

"The establishment cost is very high, and farmers already have trouble with financing," Puls said this week. "It would cost $3,000 an acre for the trickle irrigation system, trellises and planting."

"Secondly, the grower is going to be totally dependent on a processing facility up in Mississippi, and the freight on a $200-a-ton product will come off the base price," he said.

"Muscadine juice is an un-exploited industry, but if we had a local processor I'd have a more optimistic outlook," Puls said.

"On top of that muscadines are extremely high in hand labor, for the scaffolding, training, pruning, spraying and picking. We just don't have hand labor you can afford," Puls said.

The horticulturist suggested that peaches, even on small acreages, will provide higher returns for landowners in the area.