A new crop is growing in Louisiana, and it's not your typical agricultural crop. Monte Moncrief, a shiitake grower, believes that shiitake mushrooms can become another small farm crop in Louisiana. Shiitake mushrooms are brown, somewhat round, and fleshy. They are sold fresh, or they can be dried, stored, and rehydrated when the cook is ready to use them.

Unlike some edible mushrooms that grow in caves or cellars and other such dark and dank places, shiitakes colonize dead tree logs and "fruit," or put out edible mushrooms, on the outside of the logs. Moncrief now oversees the beginnings of a shiitake-growing operation on Springfield Farms, which intends to chart some new territory in growing food.

Springfield Farms is at Collum Landing on the Natalbany River south of Springfield in Livingston Parish. The location is Collum plantation, which years ago grew strawberries and other fruits and vegetables.

Glenn Davis is in charge of developing organic — no chemicals — produce and herb farming. Herman "Bize" Threeton, who has lived in the area all his life, works on the farm, as does Cynthia Cavin. Cavin once worked in the Hammond offices of Neill Corp. Edwin Neill and his wife, Deborah, who is Moncrief's daughter, own Springfield Farms.

Farming is another in a series of jobs and careers for Moncrief. He worked several years for Litton Industries, which built submarines and ships at Pascagoula, Miss., worked for a time as a defense contractor and owned a construction company.

Originally, Moncrief said, the idea of the farm was to be self-sustaining and provide food for the family. The Neills are interested in health and take the "holistic" approach to farming.

Unusually, Moncrief settled on the shiitake mushroom for a variety of reasons, he said.

"We found that it would be nutritious . . . " Moncrief said. "It would bring in some money to support the sustainable agricultural crop. We felt we could do it."

He studied the mushroom and visited growing sites. "It just became an obsession and now we are encouraging people to grow it," he said.

The farm already has mushrooms in various stages of production. The operation begins with Davis, Cavin and Threeton inoculating short hardwood logs with the mushroom spawn.

The inoculation method used at Springfield farms involves drilling shallow holes in a log, stuffing them with spawn and waxing over the holes to keep out unwanted fungus.

The logs, about four feet long and not too heavy for one person to handle, are then kept shaded up to a year or more while the spawn colonizes the inside of the log.

At some point near production time, each log is "manipulated," or given a few solid whacks with a wooden mallet. They are soaked in water for several hours and then exposed to bright sunshine — a kind of shock treatment that causes the mushrooms to fruit.

Moncrief wants to have 2,000 logs a week fruiting, or about 10,000 logs in all, Moncrief said. A log produces about two pounds of shiitakes a year, and a good log will produce for four years, if properly managed, he said.