**Ag Awareness and Appreciation Award**

Clemson University Cooperative Extension, South Carolina

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**Abstract**

The South Carolina Grower website (<https://scgrower.com/>) provides timely information about fruit and vegetable production to growers, industry, and government representatives in South Carolina. Content includes Weekly Field Updates, Questions of the Week, research updates, upcoming events, and grower resources. The site is designed to be a one-stop shop for all things related to fruit and vegetable production in the state. All content is created through the cooperation of Clemson fruit and vegetable Extension Agents and Specialists. The site was created in 2019 and now has over 500 subscribers and over 100,000 views.

**Situation**

South Carolina is a relatively small state but has an estimated 79,000 acres of specialty crops (2017 NASS estimates). Resources and information for growers has historically been scattered among numerous agencies, including Clemson University, SC Department of Agriculture, SC Farm Bureau, the USDA, and several non-government organizations. Growers frequently have a hard time locating information on production, insurance, finance, marketing, food safety, etc. Clemson Extension has a rich history in working closely with specialty crop growers to provide information, but even extension agents may occasionally have a hard time locating resources. Communication among the specialty crop industry also lags behind other areas of agriculture, with press being focused on row crops. Meeting announcements are typically handled by individual agents and organizations, and are often missed if growers are not included on the specific email list used to advertise.

**Public Relations Objective**

Recognizing the need for improved communication and ease of accessing resources, Clemson Extension agents Justin Ballew and Zack Snipes devised a new way to share current events, upcoming meetings, and resources. The overall objective was to create a one-stop-shop where growers and industry professionals could go to access all the information needed for their operations, thereby improving communication and making it easier to locate resources.

**Program Execution**

The South Carolina Grower (SC Grower) website was created in 2019 by Justin Ballew and Zack Snipes. The website has 4 main features aimed at addressing specific specialty crop industry needs.

1. The first feature is the Weekly Field Updates. These updates are published each Monday morning and feature first-hand accounts from Extension Agents (all listed at the top of this page) about what is happening in the fields in their regions. Updates include what is being planted, harvested, any pest issues that are occurring, and what to do/look out for over the next week. The updates also include a fun Question of the Week, and reminders about relevant meetings coming up over the next week.
2. The next feature is the About page. This page includes a photo and short bio of each contributing Agent and Specialist. This page allows growers to quickly see which Agent covers their area. Contact info for each Agent and Specialist is included.
3. The Upcoming Meetings page provides a list of fruit and vegetable programs coming up over the next few months. Registration links and program contacts are included.
4. The Resources page provides a plethora of grower resources including links to production and IPM guides, where growers can check their pesticide credit status, soil and plant tissue testing, organic certification, weather station data, chill hours maps, etc.

While all the listed Extension agents work as a team to contribute content, the site is maintained by Justin Ballew, Zack Snipes, Sarah Scott, and Rob Last. The website is evaluated annually by an advisory committee made up of individuals outside of Clemson Extension. Any necessary changes or additions based on the committee’s feedback are made following the evaluation.

**Results and Evaluation**

Quantitative Results:

The SC Grower site has been in operation since 2019. It saw significant growth in 2020 when much of Extension adapted to working remotely. Growth has steadily continued and the site now has 501 subscribers including farmers, industry representatives, politicians, and agents and specialists from Clemson and other universities in neighboring states. Since it’s inception, the SC Grower has received well over 100,000 views (35,996 in 2023). 452 post have been made (126 in 2023). The site has received views from 155 different countries, which is interesting considering our target audience is fruit and vegetable growers in South Carolina.

Qualitative Impacts:

* Growers frequently comment to agents about how they look forward to the Weekly Field Updates and use the content to make timely management decisions. Growers are excited to see pictures of their farms featured on the site (of course, disease or other problem related photos are posted without farm names).
* While the target audience is commercial growers, home gardeners also use the site and apply the information from to their home gardens.
* South Carolina Farm Bureau and the South Carolina Department of Agriculture use the Upcoming Events page to advertise fruit and vegetable-related programs to growers. These agencies provide links or print hard copies of the Upcoming Events page to hand out to their constituents.
* The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) uses the information from the Weekly Field Updates to determine when to initiate their Frost and Freeze programs in South Carolina.
* The US Drought Monitor uses info from the Weekly Field Updates to help update the drought status in South Carolina.
* Multiple high school ag teachers use the Question of the Week as quiz and homework assignments for their students.
* Content is also featured on the following:
	+ Clemson’s Home and Garden Information Center blog (<https://hgic.clemson.edu/?s=field+report>)
	+ Clemson’s Horticulture Team Instagram page (<https://www.instagram.com/horticultureclemsonextension/>)
	+ AgNet Media’s Specialty Crop Grower blog (<https://specialtycropgrower.com/?s=Clemson>)