

Small Farm Schools Empower Beginning Farmers in Santa Rosa County



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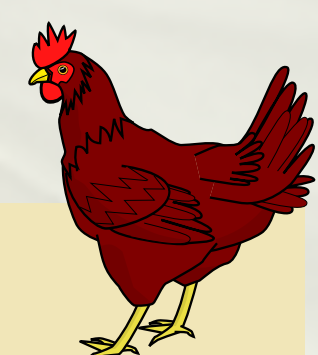
Introduction

The specialty crop industry in Santa Rosa County includes production of fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, and nuts on small acreages, generally of 15 acres or less. There are many issues affecting new and seasoned producers, such as business and marketing planning, food safety regulations, pesticide use regulations and licensing, labor challenges, and changing production technologies and practices. Two Small Farm Schools instructed beginning farmers on fruit and vegetable production practices and whole farm management.



Objectives

- Participants of the school will gain knowledge of suitable and marketable crops for the Florida Panhandle.
- Participants of the school will make better business decisions resulting in cost savings and/or increased profits for their respective farms.
- Participants of the school will network with each other and other members of the Santa Rosa County farming community resulting in better accessibility to available resources and better business decision making.



Methods

Classes began in October, each year, to coincide with fall produce availability. Instructional methods included lectures, hands-on activities, and a farm tour to accommodate different types of learners. Classes started with PowerPoint lectures, followed by discussion and hands-on activities.



Class Topics
Suitable and Marketable Crops for the Florida Panhandle
Fertility and Soils
Irrigation Installation and Management
Whole Farm Pest Management
Business and Marketing



The farm tours were a valuable aspect of the schools and gave participants a first-hand look at crops grown in the area and valuable farm management recommendations. The tours visited a local vegetable farm, a hydroponic lettuce operation, and the fruit tree plots at the West Florida Research and Education Center.

Results

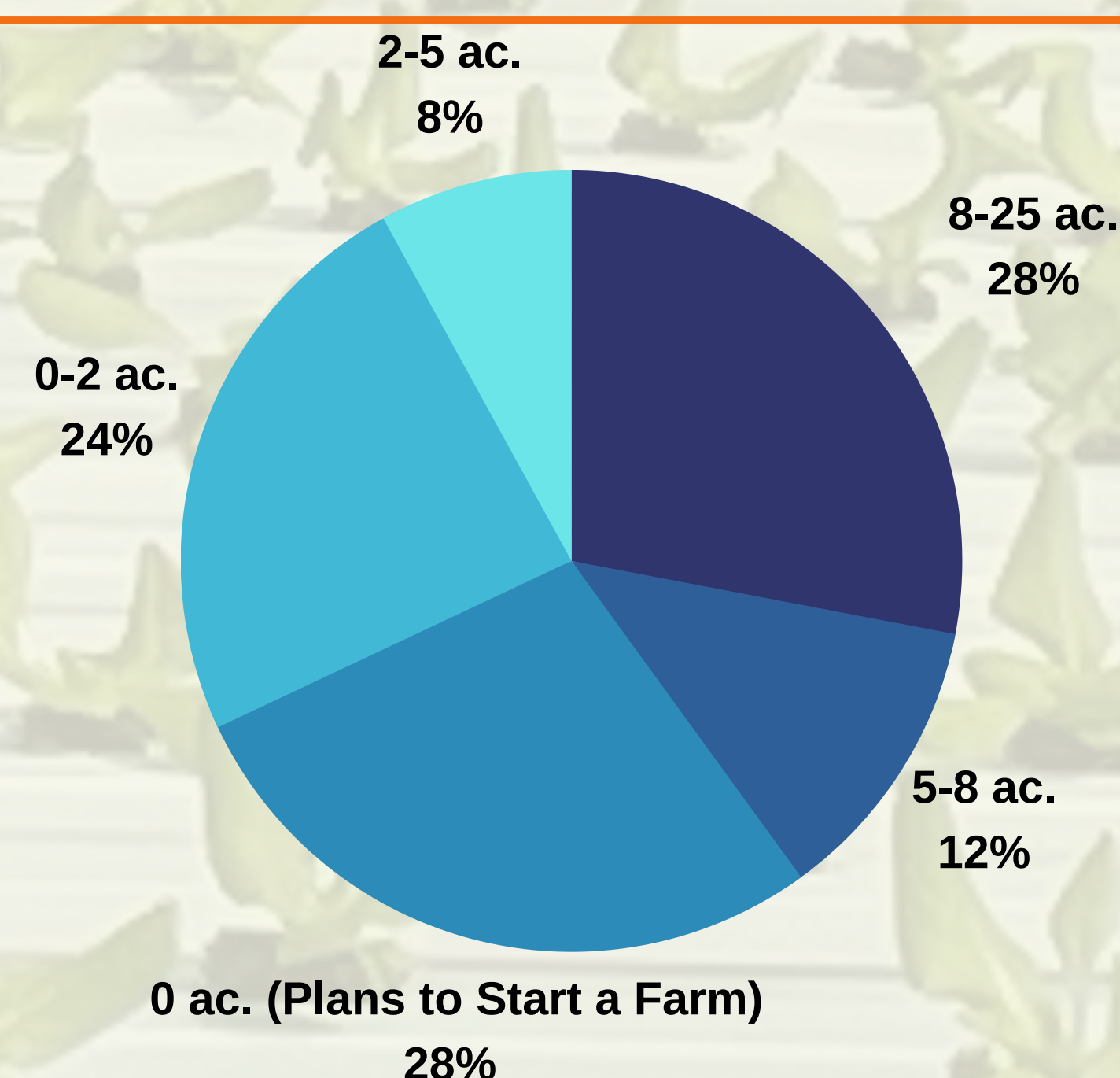
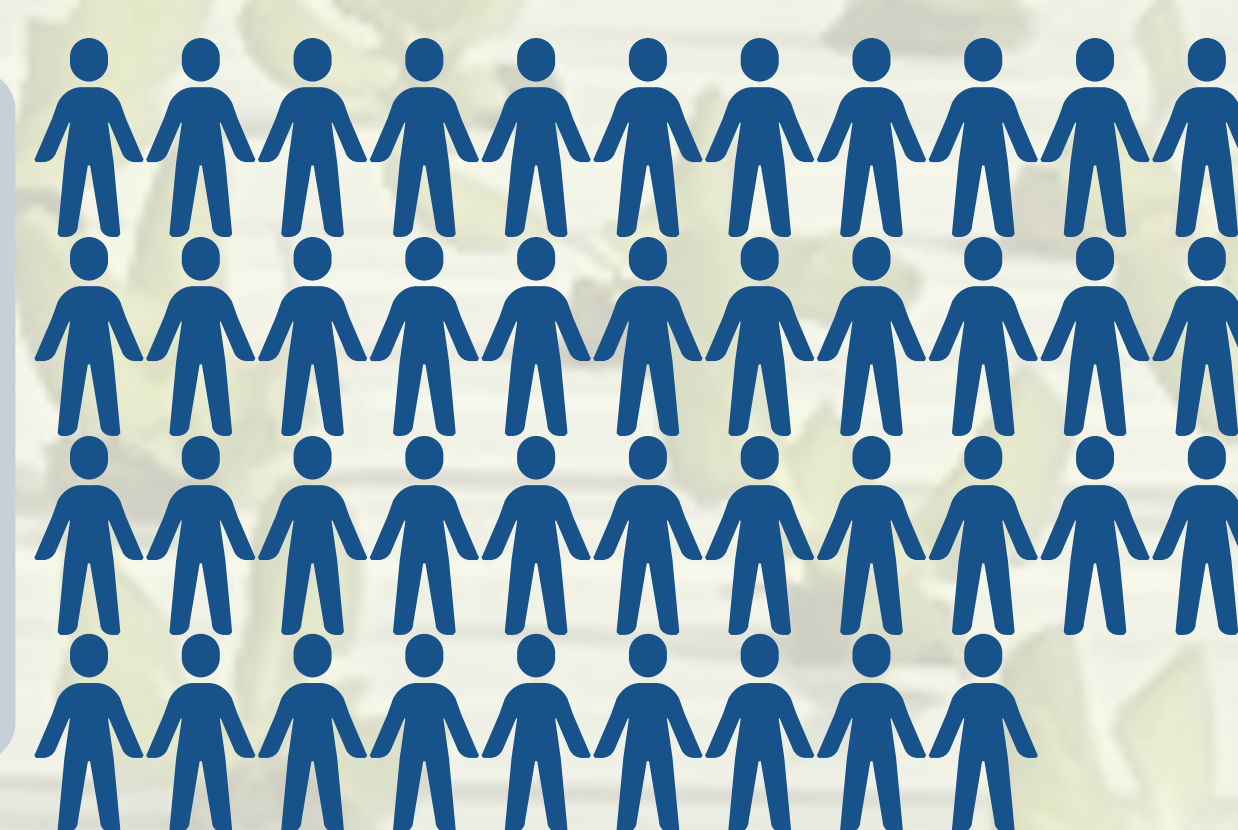
Evaluations were administered upon the completion of the schools to gauge change in self-reported knowledge and intent for change in production practices.



Overall self-reported farming knowledge increased by 96% across all topics

96%

42 participants attended the two schools and farm tours.



The average acreage farmed by each participant was 10.75 acres.

Impacts

Participants of the schools gained knowledge of production techniques and suitability of various fruit and vegetable crops for the Florida Panhandle.

Program participants indicated a value of more than \$10/acre per year, in the form of savings or increased profit, from the knowledge they gained from the school.



As a result of cropland property value information discussed in the school, one of the participants was able to purchase a 16.18 acre parcel for \$2,685/acre below asking price for a total savings of \$43,443 for the parcel.

A Facebook group was established to allow networking and collaboration among class participants, established farmers, and the Extension Office.

